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ASHES OF EVIDENCE

▼ ERIC LEVISON ▼

1. Fiction, America



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ASHES OF EVIDENCE

By
ERIC LEVISON

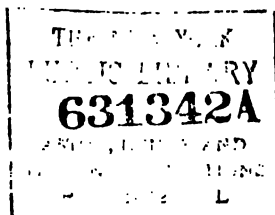
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ASHES OF EVIDENCE

ASHES OF EVIDENCE

CHAPTER I

BY TELEPHONE

NEWS was dead. The city room of the Florida *Times-Union* personified lassitude. Reporters lounged indolently at their desks: some reading the final edition of the *Metropolis*, Jacksonville's afternoon paper, some discussing languidly the possibilities of the coming gubernatorial campaign, and two were matching nickels in a half-hearted, desultory fashion. Even the city editor was, for the moment, silent: there was no one to swear at. No one had done anything wrong for the very simple reason that there had been nothing to do.

It was one of those late afternoons that comes every once in so often to all newspaper offices: a day on which there is a complete and absolute stagnation of news. Nothing had happened, and nothing, it seemed, could happen.

Only the state editor was busily editing the small-town copy that was to occupy the space allotted to the local department.

Even the tall stately sycamores outside the windows of the city room seemed touched with the germ of languor, for no breath of air moved their still tops, and not the faintest rustle of leaves came through the open windows.

And into this atmosphere of lethargic idleness came the sudden shrill summons of the telephone.

Coleman Ransom turned to the telephone desk only for lack of something better to do. Ordinarily it would have been beneath his dignity to answer a telephone: that was for the office boy or the cub reporter, but even a telephone conversation promised some small relief from the soporific atmosphere of the city room.

He lifted the receiver languidly to his ear, and his drawled "Hello" drifted aimlessly into the transmitter.

The voice that came from the other end was keenly alive: "Hello! *Times-Union!*"

"Yes."

"Is Mr. Coleman Ranson there?"

The blond young reporter displayed a trifle more interest in the conversation: "Ranson at the phone," he announced expectantly.

"*Coleman Ranson?*"

"Yes, Coleman Ranson, the one and only. Who's talking?"

No heed was paid to the query, but the voice seemed satisfied of the identity of the reporter.

"I want to get a little information."

Ranson smiled indulgently, wondering lazily what form the next question would take and whether the encyclopedia was handy for reference. He more than half-anticipated a request for the exact mileage from the earth to the moon on December twelfth, eighteen hundred and ninety-six, or, perhaps an inquiry concerning the last published schedule of the Clyde Steamship Company. But his voice was condescendingly good-natured:

"Yes?"

"I want to know," came back the voice sharply and distinctly, "I want to know what facts you have regarding the recent murder of Lucian Avery."

Ranson's figure stiffened in his chair; his indulgent smile vanished. In a second he had changed from the insouciant, care-free loungeur to the sharp, alertly expectant reporter.

Lucian Avery murdered! Every nerve reacted sharply to the words. With the death of Lucian Avery news suddenly descended into the city room in a veritable flood. No single happening could shake the city of Jacksonville more thoroughly from its careless enjoyment of the beginning winter season. Lucian Avery: capitalist, master-promoter and city-developer. And Lucian Avery had been murdered.

Ranson's impulse was to shout a series of ques-

tions into the telephone, but his training held him in check. He strove hard to make his voice idly conversational:

"The murder of Lucian Avery?" he repeated slowly.

"That's what I said." There was an impatient snap in the voice from the other end of the wire.

"When? Where?" Ranson tried vainly to drawl the words.

"I'm asking," reminded the voice. "I want to know what you've got on it."

Ranson sparred carefully for time.

"We haven't all the facts," he began craftily. "Tell me what you already know of it. And who's talking?"

For the second time the query went unanswered and the voice repeated:

"I'm asking, not answering."

"Didn't know the news had got out yet," Ranson continued quickly. "Where'd you get it?"

A sharp clear click denoted the fact that the possessor of the voice had hung up the receiver.

For a moment Ranson jangled the receiver hook of his instrument impatiently. Then the clear cool voice of the *Times-Union* switchboard operator broke in with: "Number, please."

"Number!" Ranson shot back. "The devil! I was connected and you cut me off."

"Excuse, please." The operator's voice varied not the least bit from its cool calmness.

Ranson turned from the telephone to find the entire city room posed to indicate suspended animation as they watched him. The city editor had risen and crossed to the telephone desk, inquiry large in his eyes.

"Something up?" he queried.

"Something up?" Ranson echoed inanely. "Something up? I should say there *was* something up. Lucian Avery's been bumped off!"

"Lucian Avery? Who by? When? Where? How?"

"Yes, Lucian Avery. To the rest of 'em the answer's the same: I don't know. Some one on the phone just now called to find out what we had on it; tried to kid him along to get a line on just what *he* knew, but he got peeved and hung up on me. Talked like he had the dope all right, and had it straight!"

The city editor whirled on the man nearest him. "Johnson, you hike to the composing-room and tell the managing editor to hold space for a whale of a local story. Tell him Lucian Avery's been killed; that'll make him sit up. Simpson, get at that type morgue and dig up the biography of Avery we ran when he was elected president of the city council; have it proved and hustle the sheets down to me. Ranson, it's your story. Take anybody you want,

but get it, and get it quick. Spread it all over the place. This is the biggest thing that's broken yet. Hop to it, everybody!"

He started to his desk, but stopped short again. "You, Carter, beat it to Avery's clubs: first the Seminole and then the Florida; get statements from 'em, and, for the love of Mike, let's get some action on this thing!"

Ranson grabbed for the telephone again. "I'll get hold of Herndon and see what he knows about it?"

"Want me to beat it there?" an excited cub interjected.

Ranson shook his head. "Just sit tight a minute; I'll get a statement from Herndon and then I'll go down with you. Hello. Hello, there. Come to life, will you? Main four hundred; yes, four-double-o. That's it."

The city room had suddenly become alive with active excitement. Gone was the air of lethargy and indolence. The news of the murder of the city's leading citizen, the biggest local story of the decade, had successfully aroused vital interest in the next morning's issue of the *Times-Union*.

"Hello—hello. Headquarters? Give me Inspector Herndon, please. Hello—that you, Inspector?"

A big bass voice boomed over the wire: "Inspector Herndon talking."

"This is Ranson of the *Times-Union*."

"All right," boomed the voice. "Shoot."

"What dope 've you got about Lucian Avery having been killed?" Despite himself Ranson's voice trembled slightly.

"Huh! What's that? Didn't get you?"

"Avery, I said; Lucian Avery. 'A'-v-e-r-y."

"All right, I got that. What about him?"

"Murdered!"

"Murdered? Th' hell you say!" The inspector was, evidently, excited. "Haven't heard a word. What's this yarn you're tryin' to give me? Straight dope?"

"Yes, I think it is." Ranson came back quickly. "Some one called here on the phone and asked what we knew about it. Seemed up in the air, but he knew what he was talking about."

"Have you called Avery's house?" The inspector's bass could be heard very plainly by the cub reporter standing excitedly near by.

"No. Called you first. Thought maybe you could——"

And for the second time within a very few minutes there came to Ranson the unmistakable click of a receiver hook. The inspector had cut off.

Ranson dropped his own receiver only long enough to attract the attention of the operator. He knew Avery's number, knew it very well indeed, for but very few days passed that he did not telephone

Avery, either at his house or office, to get salient facts for some important local story.

Lucian Avery seemed to have a very big finger in every city or state pie, and there had been no important business deal of the past few months that had not shown the hand of Avery in some of its ramifications.

"Get me main double-four-two-three. And please get it quickly; it's important."

"All right, Mr. Ranson, I'll call you." The switchboard operator had recognized the urgency in Ranson's voice.

Ranson held the instrument, however, not daring to waste a moment. He covered the transmitter with his hand and called across the city room:

"Police Department on the job as usual," he commented sarcastically. "Hadn't heard a word."

"Not a thing?" The city editor was incredulous. "Sure he isn't trying to hold out on us?"

"You should 've heard him. I'm trying to get Avery's house now and see what they have to say." He clicked the receiver hook impatiently.

The switchboard operator answered. "Sorry, Mr. Ranson, but the line seems to be busy."

"Get 'em for me the minute you can, will you please?" Ranson returned the receiver to its hook.

The city editor allowed his interest to overcome his dignity. He crossed the room and sat on the desk beside Ranson.

"Who do you expect to get out there?" he inquired. "The old guy lived alone, didn't he?"

"Not exactly," Ranson replied, reaching for a cigarette. "There's a housekeeper: Mrs. Mallows, and the secretary: a girl named Irma Watkins—nice sort of kid."

"And she lives out there alone with old Avery?" The city editor appeared to be interested in this minor development.

"With him and the housekeeper, yes; what's wrong about that?"

"Nothing—much," commented the city editor thoughtfully. "But it sounds kind of funny, somehow. A girl secretary living with a widower."

"You're forgetting the housekeeper," reminded Ranson. "Mrs. Mallows is as good a chaperon as I know of, and, if you knew Irma Watkins you'd agree with me that it was all right."

"Who is she? Has she got any folks?"

Ranson shook his head. "Not that I know of. I met her through the MacDonalds—you know Raymond, don't you? Well she's at their house a lot—quite chummy with Clara MacDonald. She's been working for Avery about a couple of years; first in his office and then at his home as private secretary. I believe she comes from somewhere down the state. A mighty nice kid, too."

The city editor shrugged. "Just the same," he insisted, "it does sound funny."

"Have it your own way, if it makes you happy." Ranson flipped his cigarette aside.

"It does. It gives me something to think about." The wait was irritating the city editor, and he spoke peevishly: "Try that phone again." He was mentally planning the spread that would announce the news of Avery's murder to the city.

He could see the long array of type that would rehearse the career of the city's most prominent financier, rehashing once again the matter in which he had been responsible for the development of the city's suburbs, and telling once more of the enormous wealth that had accrued to the man through his operations.

There would be a column on his recent activities in the matter of a Florida railroad, Avery's first venture into the field of pure high finance since his acquisition of the West Coast Central some years before. The West Coast Central incident was still furnishing material to the scribes of Florida newspapers, and the near-scandal—averted miraculously, for no one knew just how—would now, doubtless, be revived.

Nothing now stood in the way of the feature article the city editor had long ago planned to write about the methods and manners of modern state and city builders. The death of Avery released a large amount of hitherto questionable material; material that the *Times-Union* could not very safely

have handled during Avery's lifetime. For the man's activities had reacted too strongly on the city's welfare to be questioned. His name and enterprises were too closely interwoven with Jacksonville and Florida politics for any newspaper to hint that he had, on some occasions, perhaps overstepped the bounds of the absolutely legal. The results of his transactions were too far-reaching; too vitally important to the state's and city's growth and wealth for any one to attempt to cast the slightest shadow of doubt on the manner of their accomplishment.

But now Avery was dead, and the Sunday full-page feature began to take definite form in the editor's mind while his eyes unconsciously drifted about the city room in search of Hugo Miller, the recently acquired feature writer.

The suppressed muttering of Ranson broke into the city editor's speculations. Ranson was drumming on the desk impatiently. The inspector had beat him to it; had secured the connection with Avery's house just a moment before the *Times-Union* operator had transmitted his own. To be held up on a story, even for a moment, was galling. And what a story! "*Millionaire Murdered in His Palace on the St. John's!*" "*Florida's Greatest Capitalist Dies at Hands of Assassin!*"

Then the discordant jangle of the telephone broke in.

The receiver was off the hook and at Ranson's ear in a split-second.

"Hello. Main double-four-two-three?"

The city editor dropped from the desk and stood half-leaning over the reporter.

"Yes." The answer came short and incisive from the other end of the wire.

"Mr. Lucian Avery's residence in Ortega?" Ranson was painfully precise in his questioning.

"Yes—what is it?"

"*Times-Union* speaking;" the reporter's voice was rising to a higher key. "Who—who's at the phone?"

Without a moment's hesitation the answer came:

"This is Lucian Avery speaking."

CHAPTER II

GUESSES

THE powerful police launch, expertly guided by the inspector of Jacksonville's Detective Department, threw twin sheets of sparkling spray to the sides of its high-pointed bow as it cut through the swift-flowing St. John's River at a good twenty-five knot clip.

To Detective Jackson, the only other occupant of the launch, the speed was fear-inspiring, and, to his mind, entirely unjustified, even by the scenic panorama that unfolded before the onrushing little craft.

Far to the left, in the dusk of early evening, tall trembling pine-trees stood sentinel before low-hung, swiftly scudding cloud banks, while about their bases struggled a faintly visible line of green extending far down the sloping river-bank. On the right loomed the multi-shaped buildings, the squat warehouses and the immense docks of the city, seemingly cast haphazard to the water's edge, and contrasting sharply with the green wooded sweep of the opposite bank; while above the swift north-flowing river there hung a faint illusive perfume: the exquisite tang of Florida autumn.

But for Mr. Jackson of Headquarters these things had no existence, and he eyed the broad back of the inspector for several minutes before he dared voice his question:

"Say, Chief, what's the hurry? What's up, anyway?"

The inspector expertly twisted the launch past a lumbering ferry-boat as he answered:

"Goin' out to Lucian Avery's place. Know it?"

Jackson did, and the name interested him sufficiently to cause a carefully considered move toward the tiny seat opposite the small wheel at which the inspector sat.

"Yeh, what's happened to him?"

To which the inspector's answer was more suggestive of possibilities than illuminating.

"Nothin'—yet!"

"Huh?" The Jacksonian mentality did not immediately grasp the inspector's reply. "What d' y' mean—yet?"

The launch slowed perceptibly as it neared the web-like steel span of the Atlantic Coast Line Railway's bridge thrown high over the hurrying river, and the inspector turned momentarily to his assistant.

"Ranson of the *Times-Union* had a phone call while ago asking for information concerning Avery's murder."

"*Murder?*" Jackson forgot his innate dislike of travel by water. "Avery's been murdered?"

"Naw!" The inspector nosed his craft cautiously between two heavily-laden barges. "Didn't I just tell you that nothin' 's happened to him yet?" He narrowly escaped destruction in the wake of an out-bound Clyde Line vessel. "That's the funny part of it," he continued calmly, "and it's mighty funny. Had his house on the phone just before I left and he was there big as life."

"Did y' tell him he was supposed to be murdered?" The situation seemed to appeal to Jackson, for his beetle-brows drew into a thoughtful frown.

"What d' y' think I'm rushin' out there now for?" The inspector's question and tone of voice left no doubt as to his own private opinion of the reasoning power of Detective Jackson.

Jackson subsided as the launch leaped ahead again into the thinning traffic below the bridge. Then he was thrown suddenly far over in his seat as the inspector twisted the wheel hurriedly and muttered a fervent: "Blast that fool tug!" while the launch careened drunkenly a moment before it settled steadily again into its course.

The jerk, however, seemed to have speeded up Jackson's sluggish mental processes.

"Who'd you say the *Times-Union* got its dope from?"

"What?"

"Where did that guy Ranson get the dope he spilled to you?" Jackson changed the form but not the text of his question.

"That's what I'm trying to find out," the inspector admitted. "Whoever it was that it came from called the *Times-Union* by phone and cut off immediately. Then Ranson called me, thinkin' maybe we were tryin' to hold out on the papers."

Jackson pondered this as the launch took the wide curve of the river and approached the scattered suburb of Ortega.

The right bank of the river began to take on a new aspect. Gone were the building and docks and warehouses of the busy city, their places taken by broad vistas of level or gently-sloping lawns, broken only by occasional glimpses of well-built homes set far back from the river amid the sycamore and palm trees.

And, as the launch sped, Jackson was not the only one pondering the question. The same subject was, at that moment, engrossing the entire attention of Coleman Ranson in the offices of the *Times-Union*.

The reporter knew that the inspector had lost no time in hurrying to the residence of Lucian Avery, and he knew, also, that he could not hope to reach Avery's home by the automobile road before the inspector, who would take the shorter river route, arrived there. And Ranson realized, moreover, that

there was more chance of eventually getting any story there might be in the alarm from the inspector's department—although the members of that particular municipal department were notoriously close-mouthed—than there would be of getting it from Avery.

So he turned to the city editor's desk. "What do you say, Hal? Shall I try to get a line on that call?"

And the much harassed city editor nodded a brief agreement to the suggestion.

But it was no easy task to trace to its source a telephone call that was merely one of many carelessly received, and it was only by dint of the most earnest persuasion that Ranson was able to interest a lackadaisical supervisor of switchboards in the central office of the telephone company.

Even then considerable time elapsed before he learned the address from which the call had come to him, and only because it chanced that central remembered the call, which fact was sufficiently unusual to make Ranson feel optimistic that his luck would hold. His rising enthusiasm was immediately dampened, however, by the additional information from the supervisor that the telephone in question was an ordinary pay-station in a drug store in the suburb of Springfield.

Nor could the girl at the paper's private exchange add anything to the information that the caller had

asked immediately to speak to Mr. Coleman Ranson and had said that his business was urgently important when he declined to give his name.

Slender as the information appeared, Ranson determined to follow it up, although he had little hopes that any important results would come of his investigation.

He descended to the street and stood, undecided, a moment, gazing at the bustling traffic of Forsythe Street. Far down the blank dial of the huge post-office clock challenged his momentary attention; beyond this the Atlantic National Bank Building lifted its ornamented head above the surrounding structures, and still farther down and to the right rose the towering structure of the Heard Building, far above the crowded thoroughfare which has been called Jacksonville's Wall Street.

Here Ranson encountered Hugo Miller, a recent arrival to the city and the new addition to the staff of the Florida *Times-Union* in the capacity of feature writer.

Knowing of old the proverbial value of two heads, Ranson invited Miller to accompany him, and the two men, climbing into Ranson's cheap automobile, were soon speeding in the direction of Springfield.

Once clear of the down-town traffic, Ranson explained the situation to Miller. Miller was all enthusiasm.

"Now, let's see;" he recapitulated. "You get a phone call from some unknown party asking for information concerning the murder of a prominent man; he is prominent, isn't he?"

"I'll say he is." Ranson's slangy reply was positive as he steered carefully across the small bridge in Main Street that spans the omnipresent Hogan's Creek which flows for miles through the parks and city of Jacksonville and ends its odorous and hectic career by a final fetid spurt into the all-receiving St. John's River.

"Good then. The inspector, doubtless, did the same thing you did: called Avery's house and found that he was there O. K."

Ranson nodded. "That's what he did all right."

"And the inspector said he knew nothing, eh? Say, are you sure he wasn't bluffing?"

"Absolutely sure." Ranson nodded again as his hand eased the throttle up on the gas arc and the car darted down the straight stretch of Main Street which leads into the suburb of Springfield; the northern side of the city of Jacksonville.

"Boy, oh, boy!" The feature writer chuckled to himself. He was already planning a half-page layout. "What a bird of a feature yarn!"

And, although it was his first trip through this particular portion of the city, Miller was oblivious to the view afforded from Main Street: the vast glistening expanse of sparkling water with its cen-

ter cascading stream that forms the inexhaustible reservoir of the city's water supply, and comes gushing from deep, sulphurous artesian wells.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Ranson was not, at the moment, particularly interested in Miller's specialty. The actualities of the situation that confronted him were sufficiently puzzling.

"Don't think anything yet. Suppose you tell me something about this guy Avery. Big man, philanthropist and all that, I suppose, isn't he?"

"Not much on the philanthropy," was the reply. "Big man, though; the biggest in the state since Flagler. Promoter is what he calls himself. He developed this suburb you're in now. Nothing but a sandy desert when he grabbed it; also Ortega on the other side of town; that's where he lives himself. Must have made a million or more on his last few deals."

"And probably got away with a lot," Miller broke in quickly. "Had to buy up a lot of land on the q. t. didn't he, or did he own it all?"

"Bought it," Ranson explained briefly. "Bought it for something like ten dollars or more an acre; some ridiculous figure anyway. But it was unimproved."

Miller whistled. "Thought so," he commented. "That means there are a lot of people in this town who feel that they've been done good and proper by Avery, doesn't it? Say, is there any outstanding

case where the seller was more than usually trimmed, or got a particularly raw deal?"

Ranson followed Miller's reasoning without effort, but he did not reply. He was busy navigating the small car into a side-street, and, a moment thereafter, brought it to a rattling halt before a small, unimposing drug store.

The two men descended from the car and entered, immediately noting the public phone booth at one side of a somewhat dilapidated soda fountain.

Miller approached the fountain, ordered a drink, and engaged in conversation with the gangling, white-aproned boy who served him, while Ranson made his way to the counter bearing above it the faded inscription: "Prescriptions Filled Here."

Miller's success with the soda boy wasn't startling. It consisted mainly of the information that soda jerking, considered quite objectively, was hardly to be classed among the overpaid professions, nor was it noted for its short hours and easy work.

"The telephone?" The soda boy frowned at Miller's sudden interruption of his monologue on the trials and tribulations of the genus soda-dispenser. "Yeh, there's one over there; five cents for three minutes."

But Miller seemed in no particular haste to make use of the indicated instrument.

"Have any users for it much?" His question came nonchalantly.

"What? Oh, the phone you mean. Naw. Why?"

"Oh, nothing much;" Ranson shrugged. "Just curious. Anybody been using it much this afternoon?"

"How'd I know?" The soda boy became whinily indignant. "I'm that busy I ain't even got time to turn around twice. When the ice-cream ain't gettin' soft, the carb'nator's busted, an' when it ain't that, then the ice's got ammonia in it or I need a dozen glasses or have to carry a drink out to the boss's wife. It ain't no cinch, this job; believe me it ain't!"

Miller knew when he was up against the impossible, but ordered a follow-up to his first soda as he noted that Ranson was engaged in an evidently satisfactory conversation with the bespectacled clerk who had come from behind the prescription counter.

Once outside the door, and after assuring the soda dispenser that he would by no means ever give serious thought to the subject of entering the profession, Miller turned to Ranson:

"Get anything?"

"Well, here's how it stands. Three people used the phone this afternoon; the guy's sure. One of 'em was a woman who lives down the street: she called a doctor; another was a driver of a furni-

ture van calling his house. Yes, I got the name of the place."

"And the third?" Miller was all attention.

"The third is the man we want, I guess."

"A man, was it?"

"Sure. I knew it was a man right along; knew that by his voice over the telephone."

"Voices don't mean a thing;" Miller asserted dogmatically. "Could 've been a woman just as easily. But—anybody know this man?"

Ranson shook his head. "No; the clerk says he's been in two or three times. Bought a cigar once or twice and this time used the phone. He's either a stranger to the neighborhood or has just recently moved out here."

Miller hummed thoughtfully. "Not much there," he admitted ruefully. "Get a description?"

Ranson turned to his automobile. "Yes, but it's not much. The kind that probably fits a dozen out of every fifteen men you see. Fits you, for instance: Looked like he was thirty or thereabouts; dressed in dark clothes; clean shaven and wore glasses. Couldn't even find out whether they were regular specs or the pinch kind."

Miller shook his head. "No use tryin' to find him out here. Besides, we've really no reason to be certain that he's the man who called you."

Ranson hesitated a moment. Then: "I'd like to gamble he's our man, though. Let's get back to

the office. I won't try to write it to-day—wait a minute." He hurried into the store again, but returned in a moment.

"What's the idea?" Miller questioned.

"Oh, I've just been arousing that young man's curiosity," Ranson replied. "I'll have him scrutinizing every customer that walks into the place for a week. Told him to phone me if he saw the man again; also to try to get his name if he could do it without asking directly, and, of course, if possible, find out where he lives." He turned to his automobile and cranked lustily. "It isn't much of a chance, I'll admit, but it's at least something."

The car was backed and turned.

Miller shook his head. "About a chance in a million, I'd say," he remarked. "Let's try the inspector."

Ranson let the car out a little before he answered. "Take my advice and don't go near the inspector unless you can bull him into believing you've got something that it's good for him to know. And whenever you get anything out of that human clam that you don't have to pry out with a crowbar, you pat yourself on the back, hear?"

"Oh, he's a tight one, eh?"

"Tight's no name for it."

Ranson knew by long acquaintance with the inspector just how much could be got out of the Detective Department in the way of information,

and he knew, further, that Inspector Herndon had never quite forgiven the panning he received from the *Times-Union* in the case of his near-failure to effect the capture of the bank looters who had terrorized Jacksonville a year or more ago. And, despite his disappointment over the apparent bare outcome of his present quest, he laughed aloud at Miller's egotistic suggestion:

"What'll you bet I get on the right side of him in a week?"

The picture of the dapper Miller getting on the right side of the burly, two-fisted, crabbed inspector was more than amusing, and the question wasn't worth answering.

Ranson returned to the matter in hand: "Let's worry about this thing right now," he suggested. "Remember: a youngish man, clean shaven, dressed in dark clothes and wearing glasses."

"You're overlooking the most important fact," Miller added.

"What's that?"

"The fact that the man has probably but recently moved into this neighborhood. That's the important thing to remember."

CHAPTER III

MISS IRMA WATKINS

THE launch slid in swiftly, and came to a bumping rest against the piling. Inspector Herndon made fast the boat's painter, and, followed by Jackson, led the way up the graveled path to the house situated some two hundred yards from the water's edge.

The inspector looked at his watch. "Twenty-five minutes to make it; that's not bad, eh?"

Jackson agreed silently, and stared about him in no uninterested fashion. He had heard and read much of the residence of Lucian Avery, capitalist, and he was making the most of this opportunity for seeing the house. It would be worth relating to Mrs. Jackson.

The approach from the south to Avery's house was directly from the river, and, almost to the edge of the water extended the famous Avery gardens, planned, it was said, by Avery's niece Clara, before that young lady's precipitate marriage and quarrel with her Uncle Lucian Avery. Large square beds of Japanese chrysanthemums raised their petaled

heads from the surrounding green, and hedges of Cherokee roses added their contrasting color, while parallelograms of crimson salvias bordered the two gravel walks that split the gardens: one leading to a summer outhouse and pavilion; the other to the private pier and boathouse extending into the river from the Avery grounds.

The house faced the north, and a wide boulevard—the building of which had been due directly to the influence wielded by Avery in the City Council—extended in a broad curved sweep into Riverside Avenue some two miles to the west.

The eastern and western extents of the Avery grounds were marked by cross-streets, the entire property really forming a tremendous square, in the center of which the Avery mansion stood proudly in a splendid isolation.

The two detectives followed the path around the house and were admitted by a servant. Evidently they were expected, for both men were immediately ushered into a library on the lower floor, the servant volunteering the information that Mr. Avery would be at leisure shortly.

Jackson gazed with open mouth at the furnishings of the library. Such luxury was far beyond his ken, and he inwardly speculated on the probable cost of the Jacobean table, although he did not recognize it as such, at which he sat. The softly tinted walls, broken on the south by a number of small, square,

French windows were miracles to the gawking detective. In the west wall, the glint of steel was seen between two partly drawn portières, and Jackson, peering through the fast gathering twilight, recognized the door of what seemed to be a huge vault.

"Some place, eh, Chief?"

The inspector grunted. "You spend a quarter of a million on a house and you'd have some place, too."

Jackson whistled his surprise. "A quarter of a million—say, how much is this guy worth, anyway?"

"Somewhere around a couple of million or more," the inspector shrugged. "And made 'em himself within the last few years," he added.

Jackson looked incredulously at his chief. "Aw, come off. He wasn't no munitioneer, was he?"

"Real estate," the inspector deigned to explain. "Avery's the man who opened up Springfield and Ortega among other things; you ought to know that."

"Uh-hu!" Jackson nodded his bullet-head industriously, then dropped his voice to a hoarse and what was meant to be confidential undertone: "Say, Chief, straight now—is this guy Avery as crooked as they say he is?"

"As who says?"

"Oh, you know. Every once in a while I get an

earful of something that he's supposed to have pulled off."

The inspector jerked his head to indicate an oil painting on the wall behind Jackson. "That's him; take a look at it."

Jackson's shrewd little eyes blinked as he took in the picture of a man of apparently sixty. The artist's work was excellent, and the keen grayish eyes that stared squarely from the picture gleamed cold and hard in the vanishing light. The lined forehead, the sharp, straight, predaceous nose and the stubborn chin gave the whole face a peculiar air of strength; of adamant, relentless strength, and the wrinkles about the corners of the hard eyes told eloquently of the scheming that had put them there.

It was not a pleasant face that met the detective's scrutiny, nor was it unpleasant. One would have been at loss definitely to classify it, yet, somehow, it left one with the impression that one had come suddenly against an impassable wall of stone. The thin curveless lips, somewhat too tightly compressed, the high cheek-bones with the hard drawn, un-wrinkled skin that covered them, and the long line from chin to temple, added to the general impression of inflexible strength that the face possessed.

To Jackson the pictured face gave answer to the question he had put to his chief; gave answer in a manner that left little doubt in the detective's mind

as to the manner in which the Avery millions had been acquired.

A muttered word from the inspector, and Jackson turned from his contemplation of the portrait to meet the gray eyes of the man who stood in the doorway. The actual personage in no way belied the picture, and both men rose from their seats as Lucian Avery entered. If ever a face spoke of power and intransigent will Avery's did, and in no uncertain terms.

The inspector's attitude was a queer admixture of official pomposity and almost menial obsequiousness, and the bass voice was as near the latter as it ever became as he addressed Avery:

"This is Detective Jackson, sir."

Jackson was conscious of the gimlet-like eyes on his face for a brief instant, and intuitively he felt the actual lack of interest the man's glance conveyed. In a moment the gray battery was turned on the inspector.

"Well, Mr. Herndon, what can I do for you?"

Lucian Avery's voice was, at that moment, singularly out of keeping with his eyes. It had a mellow soft quality that was startlingly unexpected; a tone that even Jackson's untrained ear recognized immediately as, somehow, out of place.

Directly questioned, the inspector obeyed the wave of Avery's hand and dropped back into his

seat, plunging immediately into the business that brought him.

"I received a phone call a while ago, Mr. Avery; it came from the *Times-Union*, and they inquired for news of your—your murder."

Only the slightest contraction of the pupils of the gray eyes gave testimony that Avery had heard the startling news, but the voice that questioned the inspector had lost its previous softness, and had taken on a sudden, sharply biting and penetrating quality.

"What was the reason for their asking such information of you? Who was at the telephone?"

"They asked," explained the inspector, "because some unknown party had just called them, also by telephone, and asked them the same thing. Young Ranson spoke to me—Coleman Ranson—but he could give me no information as to who called him."

Jackson gawked openly at Avery, taking in each changing expression as it flitted across the sharp face, nor did he miss the sudden, swift-passing shadow of interest as the name of the young reporter was mentioned.

"Ranson, eh? Of the *Times-Union*. Thanks for your information, Inspector." The capitalist leaned back in his chair as though the matter were ended, pushing a humidor of cigars across the table. "Will you smoke, gentlemen?"

The inspector lighted one of the thin panatellas,

but Jackson sniffed his appreciatively, and then stowed the cigar carefully into an upper vest pocket.

A momentary silence followed; a silence during which Jackson watched Avery interestedly as he lounged idly in his chair, puffing slow, wabbling rings of smoke above his head.

The inspector tapped the ashes from his cigar: "Have you any idea, sir, who could have started such a rumor?"

For a moment Avery seemed not to have heard. Then he turned, with a start, toward the inspector.

"I beg your pardon."

"I said, Mr. Avery, that, perhaps you knew of some—some—well, enemies—professional enemies so to speak, who might have——"

Avery waved a hand to dismiss the question. "A hundred men in the city would, doubtless, be glad to see me pass out." He seemed to take quite a pride in the fact, and smiled grimly over his own suggestion. "To-morrow, perhaps, I'll give you a list of a dozen or more who come instantly to mind in any action that seems to threaten my—er—welfare." He stopped a moment, absently regarding Jackson, until that gentleman straightened self-consciously in his chair. "I don't think it is more than perhaps an effort to frighten me, though."

"I don't know, sir," the inspector retorted thoughtfully. "Why should any one try to frighten you?"

Avery seemed again to be pondering another question, and the chief's inquiry went unanswered.

At this point of the dialogue Jackson bethought himself to bring to light his own cogitations, and proceeded to do so:

"Sounds like a joke, Chief. Some people has nutty ideas of what's funny, you know."

Despite the fact that Jackson's remarks were not, as a rule, noted for their profundity, there still remained always an element of common sense in the detective's suggestions; always unimaginative and delving straight to the dead center of his subject. Jackson was, in a manner, an ideal man for his position. Not the smallest sense of humor entered into his composition, and never for a moment did imagination play any part in his reasoning. There were crooks and honest men, and crooks it was his business to catch—when possible. Crimes which not infrequently baffled the keener intellects of the inspector and his force had been run to earth by the bovine Jackson for the very simple reason that no subtle deductions, and no misleading analysis ever obfuscated his outlook. "I just think," he had once explained, "what I'd 'a' done in the crook's place and sometimes I guess right; that's all."

So the inspector considered rather carefully the suggestion of the existence of a misguided practical joker.

It remained for Avery himself, however, to answer Jackson.

"Do I look like a man, Mr. Jackson, on whom practical jokes are played?"

The detective admitted hastily, and with unquestionable honesty, that Mr. Avery did not. He felt that he ought to dilate upon the admission, but Avery continued:

"And is it likely, Mr. Jackson," the sarcasm in the man's voice went miles above the bullet-headed Jackson, "is it likely that I would number among my—er—acquaintances any man asinine enough to imagine this sort of thing humorous?"

This seemed a bit too involved for Jackson to grasp all at once, and he subsided in his chair while the inspector shook his head thoughtfully, as Avery turned to him.

"You will please drop this matter where it is, Inspector, as far as publicity is concerned," he nodded curtly. "I shall see that nothing further comes of it from the newspaper end. On second thought, it will be entirely unnecessary to give you the list I suggested." He spoke with a nuance of definiteness that brooked no argument, and the hard cruel lines that appeared about the mouth boded ill for any one with temerity enough to question his orders.

"Certainly—as you wish, sir," the inspector assured hastily. "If you like, however, I can detail

Jackson here to keep an eye on—er—you and, well, to look out generally for ——”

“No, thanks.” The inspector was cut off short. “I have no desire for such protection—nor need of it. When I feel that I stand in need of your assistance, Mr. Inspector, I shall call on you. Meanwhile, you will please place none of your watch-dogs in my neighborhood.”

Jackson grunted inarticulately. He resented the word which best described him, and immediately became suspicious of Avery’s expressed intention of finishing the matter without official aid.

“As you wish, Mr. Avery, I merely suggested ——”

The inspector broke off as the door in the east wall of the library, which led into an adjoining room, opened to admit a girl who stood for a moment framed in the doorway:

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Avery; young Mr. MacDonald just phoned to ask for an interview this evening. Shall I tell him——?”

A peculiar expression had come into the gray eyes on the girl’s entrance; an expression that puzzled the watching Jackson nearly as much as the look of unquestionable hate that crossed the man’s face as he heard the name MacDonald. There was nothing in Avery’s voice when he answered, however, to give any clue to his real feelings. He

glanced at a mantel clock, and nodded briefly in answer to the girl's unfinished question:

"Tell him to come at once, and—oh, Miss Watkins!" The girl, who had turned to the door at Avery's nod, stopped abruptly. "When you deliver the message you will please return here?" Again the man's voice held the softer tone, but the manner of his speech made it no less a command.

The inspector rose and Jackson followed immediately.

"I'll advise you if anything else develops in the matter," the inspector assured.

"Nothing will; you may dismiss the entire thing from your mind," Avery returned shortly. "Again: thanks for your trouble." He remained seated as the two men turned to the door.

Once on the gravel walk that led to the river, Jackson humphed his opinion of the promoter:

"I don't cotton none to that guy, Chief. Say, who was the pippin? Some looker, wasn't she?"

"Secretary." The inspector's humor was not of the best. His official dignity had been severely ruffled in the interview, for, above all things, Inspector Herndon desired others to maintain that dignifiedly respectable attitude that his position demanded. "Named Irma Watkins," he growled ungraciously; "lives in the house. Don't know much about her."

"And this guy MacDonald, Chief, what's comin'

out to pay a nice visit. Mr. Hard Guy didn't seem to like him much—who's he?"

The inspector's answer was another question: "Know the old Skipper, don't you?"

Jackson nodded. "Sure—everybody does. Good sort of old scout."

"Well, this MacDonald is the Skipper's son." The inspector clambered into the launch, and Jackson seemed satisfied with the explanation, for he started, immediately, on another tack:

"Bet the old guy bawls out the pretty secretary," he commented. "Say didja see the once-over he gave her?"

But Jackson's conclusion was, for once, erroneous, for, when the girl reentered the library, Avery did not, for a moment, look up from the paper he had taken from the table before him, and when he did, his eyes did not meet the girl's.

"Mind telling me, Miss Watkins," the voice was mildly questioning, but a threat lay behind the soft-spoken words, "why you called Mr. Ranson of the *Times-Union* a little while ago?"

CHAPTER IV

MOTIVES

THE car containing the two newspaper men rattled again into Main Street on the return trip to the offices of the *Times-Union*. Both men were silent, Ranson intent on the twilight street before him and Miller gazing thoughtfully beyond the line of palm-trees that parallel the Springfield car-tracks.

To the left stretched the wide expanse of Confederate Park, the regular level of its green stretches broken by faintly visible flowered plots of various colors, and dotted here and there by rustic benches.

The little car rolled past the white monument that commands Confederate Park and from which the park had taken its name, while Miller scanned the occasional pedestrians as though hopeful of recognizing the man who had telephoned the weird question to the reporter beside him.

Miller prided himself on his ability as a detective, and, more often than not, made himself almost unbearably obnoxious to his colleagues when a particularly unusual mystery baffled the police. He had done some really fair investigation work on an

eastern paper, his capacity of feature writer throwing him not infrequently into contact with the Police Department, which had breathed a collective sigh of relief when Hugo Miller had announced his intention of turning southward with his talents for feature-writing and investigation. And, having but newly joined the staff of the Florida *Times-Union*, Miller thought that it behooved him to demonstrate to the effete southerner the methods of eastern newspaper writers with detective ability.

That the investigation of the telephone call had brought no very definite results was scarcely the fault of either man, but the mystery remained—unless—and Miller more than half-concluded that he had solved the matter—unless the whole scare could be attributed to a practical jokester. Wherein it will be seen that the reasonings of Miller were not unlike those of Detective Henry V. Jackson.

Near the City Engineering Building on Main Street, which stands forever in the odorous neighborhood of Hogan's Creek and the City Water-Works, the long line of white-way posts that serve to illuminate the thoroughfare which splits the city of Jacksonville, blazed suddenly into light, and, on the corner, Ranson's eyes encountered those of a man on the sidewalk who was, evidently, awaiting the arrival of a street-car.

In a moment the brakes caught and Ranson hailed the figure: "Hello, Mac; going to town?"

The man addressed peered against the glare of the headlights of Ranson's car.

"Oh, hello, Ranson—how are you?"

Ranson turned to Miller. "My friend, Mr. MacDonald," he introduced; then continued jokingly: "Mr. Raymond MacDonald, the electrical wizard from Georgia Tech."

Miller acknowledged the introduction with an outstretched hand, and descended to allow MacDonald to occupy the seat next to Ranson, while he himself climbed into the back of the car.

"Doing anything special out this way, Mac?" Ranson started the car and paid no particular attention to the man next to him, although Miller, leaning far over with his arms resting on the back of the front seat, noted the sudden, sidewise glance that MacDonald threw hurriedly at the unconscious Ranson.

"Why—er—no. I've moved out to Springfield, you know."

"I didn't know. Why?" Ranson questioned carelessly, all unaware of the patent discomfort that his question caused.

MacDonald's answer was a peculiarly unpleasant laugh; a laugh not in keeping with his clear-cut, clean-looking young face.

"Frankly, Riverside got too expensive, Ranson. I've been pretty much up against it, you know."

"And it's an infernal shame," growled the re-

porter commiseratingly. "Say, Mac, why don't you make that old reprobate Avery come——" He broke off his sentence unfinished, and turned his face a moment toward MacDonald, who, laboring seemingly under some strong emotion, apparently did not hear the unended question.

Miller, on the other hand, to whom the conversation was as unintelligible as the purest Greek, caught interestedly on the name Avery, and the speculative look in his eyes deepened.

The car, meanwhile, had made rapid progress toward the center of the city, and now brought up at the junction of Bay and Hogan Streets.

"I'll drop here, if you don't mind, Ranson;" MacDonald manipulated the catch on the door; "that is, unless you're going out Ortega way."

Ranson hesitated the barest fraction of a second. "No," he replied finally, "I'm not. Got anything important on out there?"

For a time the reporter thought that MacDonald did not intend to reply to the question, and attributed his silence to the presence of Miller who remained keenly interested in his study of Raymond MacDonald. Ranson and MacDonald had been friends long enough for the reporter to know that the young man would be in nowise offended at what might appear to be an impertinent interest in his affairs, and the reporter regretted the presence of Hugo Miller.

In a minute, however, MacDonald shrugged: "I don't mind telling you, Ran; you're in the know anyway. I've got an appointment with Lucian Avery to-night."

Ranson was taken aback. "Have you and Clara made it up with him?" he queried interestedly. "Say, that would be the greatest dope yet! Did he finally give in?"

MacDonald's frown did not lighten. He shook his head. "You know the position I'm in, Ranson. Sometimes I'm almost tempted to let things slide, for Clara's sake, and give in myself. No, old man, Avery hasn't said anything; I'm merely going to make a last attempt to appeal to whatever there may remain of his better nature. Clara feels certain that he will listen when he knows that she isn't exactly, ——" He broke off helplessly, and Miller, finally realizing that his presence was not particularly essential to the two friends, ostentatiously took his departure.

Ranson turned again to MacDonald after Miller's leave-taking.

"Can't I help some way, old man?"

MacDonald shook his head. "I thought, perhaps, you could, Ran, but I've given up the idea. As a matter of fact I came down-town intending to see you. When I first phoned Avery's house he wasn't there and then I decided to come to you. I even told Irma what I intended to do. You know as well as

I do the unscrupulous game that Avery is playing, but I realize now that the paper couldn't possibly handle the plainly libelous matter that any story of mine would make. And, after all, Clara would gain little and keenly feel even Avery's disgrace. But some day, Ranson, mark my words, some day I'm going to get the facts on Avery, and when I do I'll remember to bring them to you. Then, scandal or no scandal, I'll want you to print them! Avery is a plague spot—oh, I'm not saying that just because he dislikes me, I'm saying it because it's true, and you know it!"

The long speech seemed to have taken a great deal out of the young man; his face flushed with the anger of his thoughts, and his eyes gleamed balefully.

Ranson pondered. "And what does the Skipper say to your going out to see Avery?"

A whimsical smile broke the clouded face of the younger man for a brief instant. "Oh, dad! Poor old dad; he thinks he's entirely to blame, of course; also for the fact that I'm more or less of a failure. I didn't tell him where I was going; it would only have worried him. I'll tell him to-morrow, probably, after it's all over."

Ranson nodded understandingly. He understood why it was useless to worry the old man whom half the city knew affectionately as "Skipper." The Skipper was Raymond MacDonald's father, idolized

by young MacDonald and his wife, and worshipping them even more fervently than they did him. Particularly was the old man's affection lavished on Clara MacDonald, the girl who had given up her more luxurious life to become the wife of his son. Not that the Skipper for a moment doubted the fact that Clara had gained materially by the change, but he was too self-effacing not to conclude immediately that it was, primarily, himself who stood in the way of the girl's reconciliation with her Uncle Lucian Avery.

There was nothing against the younger MacDonald for any man to object to, but the Skipper knew quite well the narrow unforgiving nature of Lucian Avery.

The two men had been enemies for more years than either cared to reckon. The cause of the enmity, which had begun in the earliest school years of both, had long since been forgotten by the Skipper, but the quarrel had grown steadily through the lower and higher school of the city. The Skipper could, even yet, well remember the selfish joy of Lucian Avery when it became necessary for the elder MacDonald to turn to the immediate need of earning a livelihood, whereas Avery had gone from the high school into an eastern college.

The Skipper had gone into the Navy, and there he had remained during those years that brought wealth to Lucian Avery. To the Skipper the inter-

vening years had brought happiness: first in his wife and then in his son. And, when the mother had died, the Skipper resolutely set himself to the task of furnishing his son just such an education as he did not himself possess.

Nor had it been an easy matter for the old seaman to make his meager earnings cover the ever-increasing expenses attending on Raymond MacDonald's engineering course in the Georgia School of Technology. Yet his sacrifices were made cheerfully, and when, finally, the day came on which he retired with an honorable record from the service of Uncle Sam and returned once more to the city of his nativity, he considered himself triply blessed by the gods that he could live with his upstanding, educated son.

He knew no greater joy than the quiet little house that he called home; the evening chats with his engineering youngster, and the long peaceful days devoted mainly to gardening and to carving for the children of his friends strange water-craft, all carefully and exceedingly accurately rigged and equipped.

Later had come the marriage of the younger MacDonald to Clara Avery. The marriage came at a time when prospects seemed brightest for the young man. He was rapidly making a name for himself among the younger engineers of the state, and, backed by the powerful approval of Lucian Avery, he gave promise of great things.

The break in the relations between Raymond MacDonald and Lucian Avery came with startling abruptness. And the old Skipper, who had been childishly rejoicing in the announcement of the engagement of Raymond MacDonald to Avery's niece, had already begun to plan those long nights which he would have with a grandson; the old man had determined on a grandson, and the exact manner in which he would teach him the intricacies of the lines and paraphernalia of the sailing ships of old.

When the news of the broken engagement had been given by Lucian Avery to the newspapers, the Skipper grieved for his son's disappointment, hiding his own keen grief in his solicitude for Raymond, and soon attributing the whole thing to himself. The more he reasoned the more certain he became that it was Avery's personal enmity that had caused this sudden catastrophe to his boy's hopes. In his own lovable, illogical fashion, he took on his shoulders all the imaginary guilt of a horrible crime, forgetting that there had been no intercourse between himself and Lucian Avery for many years.

Socially they were as far removed as the poles, and the old man had seemed to take for granted the fact that he and his son should move in different social worlds.

What he did not know was that the break had come when Raymond MacDonald had refused to

carry out certain orders of Avery's. The promoter had, at first, taken the refusal in a laughing manner, and joked with MacDonald about a code of morals that belonged to a past century. MacDonald, quick to take offense, had defended himself, choosing the unfortunate example of his father with which to demonstrate the justice of his contentions.

The Skipper's name had seemed to infuriate Lucien Avery. Words ran high and accusations were flung hotly to and fro; accusations which, so far as those made by Raymond MacDonald were concerned, were hardly susceptible of proof, however true.

And the climax was capped by the runaway marriage of Raymond and Clara. This open defiance of his expressed will had made Lucian Avery a laughing-stock, and the man's bitter resentment was augmented by the smiles with which he was greeted, even in his own office.

When the young couple returned to the city they had taken up their residence with the elder MacDonald, and the old man took up again his pleasing dreams, all unconscious of the inferno of animosity that Avery represented.

The promoter's large house in Ortega remained closed to his friends. The entertainments and informal receptions that had been, for a long time, a part and parcel of the Jacksonville winter season,

and at which Clara Avery had always played the hostess, were not revived.

Many were the business deals that had been born in the social atmosphere of Avery's house, and many were the business meetings that had been held there under the guise of informal amusements. But these things ceased abruptly, and Lucian Avery continued to live alone in his Ortega mansion, and soon his malevolent hand began to be felt in the affairs of the MacDonald family.

Contracts that the younger man had been faithfully counting on failed to materialize. Rarer and rarer became the occasions that he was called into consultation on electrical matters, and it was not long before he realized the origin of the sudden coolness to him and his undertakings that had come over the influential men of the city.

The Skipper did his ancient and pitiful best to keep alive the spirit of youth and cheerfulness in the household—and, to a degree, succeeded.

Then had come the illness of the young wife; an illness which left her invalided due to the fact that money was lacking to secure for her the special attention that she needed.

Only once, during this time, had Raymond MacDonald approached Avery, and that once only at the suggestion of Doctor Edward Lester, who had argued passionately with his friend to endeavor to effect a reconciliation with the capitalist.

Not even the Skipper knew what had transpired at that interview, and, not knowing, the old man brooded over the fact that his presence was the cause of the estrangement and the evils which attended it.

Avery made no secret of his intense dislike for the old man, a dislike that seemed to grow with each new evidence of the regard in which the Skipper was held by his friends.

Avery had delivered his ultimatum to Raymond MacDonald at the time of his call. MacDonald and his wife were to come to the Ortega house and make their home there. The Skipper was to be left utterly alone, and the younger man was to enter without question into the Development Corporation headed by Avery.

The terms were impossible to the high-strung young man, and only the timely entrance of Avery's housekeeper prevented the two men from coming to blows. MacDonald had left the house in a wild magnified frenzy, Avery's caustic sneers burning in his mind.

And now, for the second time, the young man approached the uncle of his wife; but only at the earnest solicitation of his invalid wife herself and because he was being driven to a point of absolute despair by his inability to earn even a reasonable living in his home city, due to the maleficent influence of Avery.

And so Ranson watched his friend as the latter climbed aboard an Ortega-bound street-car, and, when the car had vanished in the direction of the viaduct that separates the city from the suburb, the reporter stared for a long time unseeingly at a large electric sign on the opposite side of the street.

Finally he turned his automobile into an intersecting street and, in a few minutes, brought up beneath the lights before the *Times-Union* Building.

Miller was awaiting him at his desk, and it was evident that Miller had been thinking.

"Say," he greeted, "tell me something about this guy, MacDonald."

And, knowing that Miller would soon learn the story in any event, Ranson dropped into a chair, lighted a cigarette, and briefly outlined the story of MacDonald's marriage to Clara Avery and what he knew of subsequent happenings.

Miller listened intently, interrupting only with an occasional question when certain relationships were not quite clear to him. He seemed particularly impressed with the character of the old Skipper, and interested in the illness of Clara MacDonald, displaying an uncanny curiosity in the prognostications of the physicians.

When Ranson finished the story, Miller sat thoughtfully contemplating the keys of his typewriter for a moment. Then he nodded in a manner that indicated his entire satisfaction with his

thoughts. When he turned again to Ranson his face was wreathed in a triumphant smile:

"Got it," he chortled; "got it pat!"

"What?" Ranson gazed interrogatively at his colleague.

"All of it; every bit. Here's the dope. This guy MacDonald doesn't love Avery a little bit." Miller began to swell visibly as he commenced to outline his careful deduction of motive from the facts.

"I'd say he had reason not to." The vehemence with which Ranson spoke told where his sympathies lay.

But Miller only nodded abruptly at the vehement retort. He was too immensely pleased with himself to notice such minor things as shades of tone and expression.

"All right, then; listen: MacDonald has it in for Avery and admits it. Avery has played the devil with the MacDonald prospects. MacDonald wants to see Avery get his and get his good. He is certain that Avery is more or less crooked, but can't exactly prove it. He wants to scare Avery into or out of something." Miller's conclusions were snapped with a finality that carried conviction. Miller had rehearsed that brittle, snappy tone, patterned after his favorite detective of fiction.

"Well?" Ranson was interested despite himself and interjected the questioning word.

Miller continued smilingly: "MacDonald is average-sized, dressed in dark clothes, clean shaven, and he has recently moved to Springfield. *Voilà!* Who did your telephoning?"

Ranson caught his breath sharply. The conclusion seemed obviously correct, and despite his desire to doubt the premise that led to it, Ranson knew it was flawless. A moment's thought as he stared wide-eyed before him brought only one small contrary suggestion:

"But he doesn't wear glasses."

And Miller's superior, pitying smile showed Ranson immediately the futility of his argument.

CHAPTER V

AN INTERVIEW

THE street-car clanged its way across the viaduct beneath which rumbled the trains of three railroads, continued into Riverside Avenue, curved sharply into Oak Street and turned, eventually, down the long, tree-lined boulevard which runs through the center of the suburb of Ortega. Long lines of palm-trees lined the tracks of the Traction Company, and palm-trees decorated the lawns of the attractive houses set far back from the sidewalks, giving to the street that semi-tropical appearance so characteristic of Florida cities, and so intriguing to the eye of the beholder.

Raymond MacDonald, however, had no eyes for the brightly illuminated thoroughfare. He sat hunched far down in his uncomfortable seat, hands folded in his lap, and eyes nearly closed. Only the occasional gripping of his fingers and the tiny wrinkles that came and went about the corners of his eyes gave evidence of the fact that the mind of the man was engaged with a problem, and the tensed square-set jaws, with their ridges of muscle, told further of the violence of his thoughts.

The street-car reached its Ortega terminal, and it was necessary for the conductor to direct his solitary passenger's attention to the fact, for he sat oblivious to his surroundings, gazing with set eyes straight before him.

At the sound of the conductor's voice he turned sharply; then rose to his feet, instinctively squaring his shoulders as though preparing to face a physical enemy, and descended to the street.

Soon his rapid pace left the street-car terminal far behind, and before him stretched only the glistening pavement of the boulevard, winding its leisurely way in the general direction of the distant army camp. A deep silence hung over the quiet street, broken only by the whispers of the high tops of the pine-trees silhouetted against the sky. A soft pleasing hum of the insects of the night rose from the side of the roadway and, far in the distance, the discordant croaking of a school of frogs echoed eerily.

Within a few minutes the man was striding excitedly up the sycamore-lined walk that led to the doorway of Avery's home, the very nearness of his destination seeming to act tonic-wise upon him, for his face lost for a moment the hard set expression it had borne, and his stride was free and swinging as he neared the entrance to the house.

It was not necessary for him to ring. Scarcely had he mounted to the broad, high-ceilinged

veranda when the front door swung wide, framing in its square of light the secretary of the promoter. The smile with which she greeted the young man was plainly forced, for no accompanying smile gleamed in the large brown eyes that gazed thoughtfully from beneath the thin line of brows of the piquant face.

"Hello, Ray." The girl extended a slim hand in greeting, a hand which MacDonald took in both his own.

"I'm awfully obliged to you, Irma," he began, "for arranging it for me. Did he object to my coming?"

The girl drew him inside. "Don't thank me, Ray—I only told him that you wanted to come and he immediately said it was all right. But please, please, Ray, don't—don't do anything you'll be sorry for."

She drew near to MacDonald pleadingly, and the young man smiled whimsically at her earnestness.

"Of course not, little girl; I'll not let go this time."

They progressed slowly across the wide reception hall, their shadows looming large on the tapestried walls.

"He's in the library," the girl volunteered, "waiting for you." Then: "How has Clara been to-day, Ray?"

The slight shake of MacDonald's head told its story to the girl, even without the words that fol-

lowed it: "Still the same, Irma. Doctor Lester was there this afternoon. He didn't stay long. Irma, listen:" and an earnest nuance crept into the man's voice, "won't you make Lester tell me the truth about Clara's condition?"

The girl blushed prettily. "What can *I* do, Ray?"

"Oh!" an impatient gesture accompanied the man's answer. "Don't play at innocence, Irma. When it is more than an open secret that Lester adores you." The man's impatience seemed to vanish with the words, and for the first time he smiled naturally. "Don't be offended, Irma, but my wife occasionally talks to me, you know."

Irma Watkins laughed aloud. "Of course I was silly, and I'll never tell Clara another thing;" she threatened. Then she continued more seriously: "I'll see what I can do, Ray. But I can't make the doctor tell me his professional secrets, you know."

MacDonald seemed satisfied with her promise. "Only get his honest opinion of Clara's condition, Irma. He always talks optimistically to me and generally to dad; but I'm afraid, Irma, horribly afraid."

The unquestionable fear in the man's eyes drew the girl to him, and her hand went comfortingly to his shoulder.

"All right, Ray; I promise to find out, and I'm sure it's not nearly so bad as you think." She turned quickly from the man. "I'll see you when

you leave, Ray," she said quietly, "and tell Clara I'll see her to-morrow."

She moved across the hall and rested her hand on the knob of the library door. The man followed her slowly, and passed through the door which the girl held open for him.

For a moment after MacDonald passed into the room, Irma Watkins stood thoughtfully before the closed door. She wondered what was transpiring between the two men on the other side of it, and, for a moment, she felt almost glad of MacDonald's concern about his wife. Surely this would prevent him from going too far; he would do nothing to jeopardize what slight chances might still remain for a reconciliation between his wife and her uncle.

The man at the table continued to read after MacDonald's entrance; the narrowing of his eyes, however, told that he had observed the younger man. When he did turn from the table he rose, facing MacDonald squarely.

"Well, Mr. MacDonald?" The voice was absolutely expressionless.

"Good—good evening, Mr. Avery." A nervousness seemed to possess the young electrician.

Avery bowed his acknowledgment of the greeting and waved his visitor to a chair opposite him. When MacDonald was seated Avery again dropped into the chair behind him.

The silence between the two men became strained. There was no place, as they both knew, for the social amenities that the situation seemed to demand, and each awaited the other's first words. And it was the less-experienced younger man whose nervousness, intensified by the silence, manifested itself by the drumming fingers on the arm of his chair.

Then: "Clara sends her regards to you, Mr. Avery."

Avery's indication that he had heard was a slight relaxation of his body.

"Aren't you mistaken, Mr. MacDonald?" The tone of the voice was as though he had but voiced a commonplace query.

MacDonald flushed at the implication. Above all things he had determined not to let Avery know, if he was not already aware of his wife's condition, the great need in which he stood, and he realized that his first sentence was doubly unhappily chosen in that it conveyed the impression, somehow, that he desired to curry favor with the man before him. And this realization colored his reply.

"I am sure that Clara is always pleased to have some one convey her good wishes; particularly since she is, unfortunately, unable to convey them herself."

The older man seemed mildly interested. "Yes? I thank you, then. And it is, perhaps, not out of

place to remind you here, young man, that it is yourself who is mainly responsible for your wife's condition."

Young MacDonald keenly felt the injustice of the retort, but he held himself in hand.

"I came to ask you," he began slowly, "why you can not let me alone? Surely you've done us more than enough harm already, without this eternal hounding."

Avery's smile was close to a sneer and his eyebrows rose interrogatively. "Just what do you mean, young man? Hounding you? I assure you that I haven't the least symptom of interest in——"

"Oh, I've known all along what you'd say," broke in the younger man hotly. "I was a fool for even approaching you, but Clara wanted it." The blurted admission was almost immediately regretted, and MacDonald hurriedly continued his remarks to cover his confusion: "Don't think I've come to ask favors. I wouldn't do that, and you know it. All I want you to do is to leave me alone—alone, understand?" The boy's excitement was running high.

Avery rose slowly and menacingly to his feet. "And let me tell you this, young man:" the voice was sharp and biting direct. "On the day that you are ready to come to me at my terms—well and good. You know what they are. You will bring my niece back to me—back to the place and position from which her puerile fancy led her. I know that

she regrets her ingratitude, and you know it, and that worthless father of yours knows it."

MacDonald leaped to his feet and faced Avery squarely. "You'll just leave him out of this!" His hands clenched at his sides as he eyed the larger man.

Avery involuntarily drew back a pace. "Now, no heroics;" he sneered, his smile one of sarcastic amusement. "It hardly becomes beggars to pose. Do you realize, young man, that I am even now in the middle of operations that will net millions?" His voice rose boastfully. "Millions, I tell you. And these your asinine code would sneer at while you starve in gentile honesty and drag your wife down with you to the beastly level of a poverty that will kill her. You've undertaken a large task—a damned sight larger task than you imagine when you set out to ridicule Lucian Avery. An invalid, is she? And by whose fault? Between you and that sniveling father of yours you'll kill her. And then you'll raise your righteous hands—hands that were unable to earn her even the necessities of life—and you'll whine at your ill luck and attribute your certain failure to my influence. *My influence!*" Avery purpled with the effort of his speech. "Why, I could squash you so utterly and entirely that you'd be damned glad to come whining when I called. And you dare come to me and snivel of my hounding. I know why you came here: you came at the

solicitation, not of Clara—she isn't a brainless fool—but because that pauper father of yours thinks to get something out of me."

MacDonald seemed ready to spring at the older man, but Avery went on unheeding. Whatever else he may have been, Lucian Avery was not a physical coward.

"I'll tell you what I'll do——" the big man was growing threatening; a sure sign that his temper was beyond the bounds of control: "I'll drive that father of yours, yes, and you, too, so far from this city of Jacksonville——"

The sentence was left unfinished, for the library door leading to the hallway swung open and a man appeared on the threshold.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Avery. I thought that you were alone."

"Come in," Avery snapped briefly. "Come in, Lerner."

And Harry Lerner, with another glance at MacDonald, entered the room and turned immediately to a bookcase built into the wall farthest from the two men.

MacDonald's face flamed under the additional insult of having a witness to the verbal threats of Avery. He knew Harry Lerner, knew him for an unscrupulous hanger-on of the city's courts before he had been picked up by Lucian Avery, to whom he had become a confidential adviser, his legal knowl-

edge standing him in excellent stead in his new position.

Lerner had grown with Avery into something resembling local fame, and there were but few men in the city who cared to question the antecedents of the lawyer in whom Lucian Avery appeared to place illimitable trust and confidence.

MacDonald's coolness toward the lawyer had had its origin at that period of the young man's career when Lucian Avery had still smiled on his courtship of Clara Avery. At that time Harry Lerner seemed to have more than slight ambitions in the same direction, and, to the society gossips, it had been an ever-interesting morsel to whisper over.

Nor had the two men renewed their even cool acquaintance after MacDonald's marriage to Clara. They met seldom, and on such rare occasions as they did each had conveniently been blind to the other's presence.

The lawyer's entrance did not, however, disconcert Avery.

"Now you can get out." He turned sharply to the door. "And when you set foot in this house again, it will be because I am not here to prevent you."

Out of the corner of his eye MacDonald saw the mildly amused smile that twitched about the lips of Harry Lerner, and he knew that the story of his humiliation at the hands of Lucian Avery would be

thoroughly spread over the city on the morrow. That smile roused in him all the fury that he had thus far, after a fashion, managed to smother.

He whirled on the waiting Avery with a ferocity that was unexpectedly breath-taking.

"And just let me add one word to that;" his voice trembled with anger. "I'll stay away from your house—and be glad to. And when your thievery brings you to the one inevitable end, then remember that I shall have had a hand in bringing you there. Oh, I'm not threatening—I'm merely telling you!"

Without waiting for a reply from the purpling Avery, he strode to the door, threw it open and slammed it shut behind him. Nor did he pause in the outer hall. Tears of sheer nervous excitement blurred his eyes, and he stepped into the night without even a thought of the waiting girl in another room of the house.

Outside the mellow softness of the moon blanketed the lawn with a carpet that could almost be felt; a multitude of stars gleamed steadily from out the cloudless sky, and, far in the distance the St. John's River twisted like a silver cord, while the never-ending chorus of the frogs broke the stillness with a soothing regularity.

For some time after MacDonald's departure there was no sound in the library. Lerner, appearing deeply engrossed in a book which he had taken from one of the cases, remained discreetly silent, while

Avery, dropping heavily into a chair by the table, gazed thunderously ahead of him.

He showed, at that moment, an expression other than that by which he was known, and even his most ardent admirers, could they have seen him, might have questioned the sudden disappearance of that cold, aloofly dignified calm that characterized the Lucian Avery known to his business associates.

The expression that transformed the man's features gave way slowly to a more normal one; only the gray eyes indicating that the mental disorder still prevailed.

"Get those titles near Black Point looked up?" Avery's voice growled suddenly into the silence.

Lerner dropped his book hastily. "You mean that Reynolds' business?"

Avery did not reply. He rarely made answer to questions of this nature, knowing that they meant little save a subconscious attempt to gain time. And, in a second, Lerner continued:

"Yes; finished with them late this afternoon. There's nothing that can be done out there. The Reynolds estate is absolutely in the clear; there's not the slightest thing to hang anything on."

Avery's eyes suddenly met the shifting ones of the lawyer. "Well, find something!" he snapped. "That's your job."

This manner of addressing Lerner was sufficient

evidence that the interview with MacDonald still rankled.

Even the suave lawyer was, for a moment, taken aback at the unequivocal stating of his exact position in the Avery enterprises.

"I doubt very much, Mr. Avery," he began unctuously, "I sincerely doubt that I shall be able to cloud the title in any way. And, furthermore,——"

"That's enough!" The interjection came bullet-like. "I said do it, didn't I? Well, you do it, and without any more talk. Or maybe I'll have to see whether——" He left the sentence unfinished, but his eyes traveled suggestively to the portières behind which was the large sunken vault, and the lawyer seemed to shrivel quailingly where he stood.

Lerner sank weakly into a chair as, with a wave of his hand, Avery dismissed the matter, nor did it again come up during the conference.

"Just what is it you wanted with me this evening, Mr. Avery?" Lerner's voice had lost a good deal of its assurance as he put the question. "I wasn't in when your message arrived," he enlarged, "but came as soon as it was given to me."

Avery lighted a large black cigar and thoughtfully followed the fine string of smoke that drifted from the match. It was pointedly noticeable that he did not offer the humidor to Harry Lerner.

Even during his spirited interview with MacDonald this matter, for which he had summoned

Lerner, had not been far from his mind. He leaned toward the lawyer, and his voice unconsciously dropped to a lower pitch as he outlined the matter of the telephone call earlier in the evening and of the inspector's visit.

Lerner toyed with his glasses, strung on a black ribbon, as he listened to the startling story, and, when Avery leaned back in his chair, the lawyer thoughtfully replaced the glasses in his pocket, and nodded slowly.

"Could some one have got wind of the new deal?" he questioned. "Some one inimical to our interests, and who is trying to frighten us out?"

Engaged as his attention was, Avery smiled patronizingly at the manner in which the lawyer identified himself with the Avery operations.

In answer to the question he shook his head negatively. "In the first place, no one knew of the deal. And, secondly, I know who did the phoning."

He enjoyed the sudden startled expression that leaped across the usually passively inexpressive face of the lawyer.

"Yes?" Lerner leaned forward eagerly.

Avery was enjoying the expectancy his vis-à-vis displayed. "The first thing when you leave here," he digressed, "I want you to stop by the *Times-Union* office and tell them I want the whole story squashed. Not a word to be printed. Tell them I said so."

Lerner nodded hurriedly. "Yes—yes; of course. You said you knew who it was?"

"I know." Avery repeated.

"Well?"

Avery's cigar jerked in the direction of the empty study adjoining the library, the door of which was then open.

"She did."

"Miss Watkins? Impossible!" There was no questioning the lawyer's incredulity.

"She did it," Avery insisted, "and I'm going to learn why." There was an unpleasant expression about the thin lips that held the black cigar.

"Are you sure?"

Avery shrugged. "I picked up the phone there;" he indicated the instrument on the table, "and found some one on the line. All I heard before I hung up the receiver was her voice asking if she had the *Times-Union*."

"But—but what did she say?" Lerner knew his man too well to suppose that Avery had not immediately surprised his secretary with his knowledge.

"She said," Avery smiled, "that she had the wrong number—and, I let it go at that."

The legal mind, however, demanded more proof. "Who did she talk with there?" questioned Lerner.

Avery looked interested. "That is so," he thought aloud. "I'll see."

He picked up the receiver and the connection was made on the private wire that ran from the house. Only a few minutes sufficed to secure a list of the few calls that had gone from Avery's house that day. The *Times-Union* number was among them.

"I'm going to make absolutely certain," he nodded to the lawyer as he gave the *Times-Union* number again to the operator. In a moment he had the desired connection.

"*Times-Union?* Hello. Was there a call recently—about five o'clock, I think, from a Miss Watkins for some one of the editorial staff?" A frown dawned between his eyes as he listened to the voice of the switchboard operator of the *Times-Union*. Then:

"I don't care what your rules are," he snapped. "And you'd better begin to remember right quickly, young lady. This is Lucian Avery talking. Yes—Lucian Avery. What is it?"

He hung up the receiver without another word and turned a little triumphantly to Lerner:

"'A Miss Watkins called and asked for Mr. Coleman Ranson!'" he quoted.

CHAPTER VI

DOCTOR EDWARD LESTER

THE early morning sunshine struggled bravely to pierce the threatening clouds, and the occasional slanting rays that battled valiantly through the mist fell on the gaunt shabbiness of a little house in a side-street of Springfield, and did little to soften the cruel unattractiveness of the place.

The small front yard was enclosed by a straggling picket fence, the gate of which swung with a wretched air on the rusty hinges. A cracked cement walk extended from the front steps of the house, through the yard and to the rickety gate. On this walk a man worked slowly and methodically, trimming the withered grass that grew between the cracked blocks of the cement, and singing softly as he worked:

A sai-ai-ailor's wife a sailor's sta-a-a-ar should be.
Yea-O we go, across the sea;
A sai-ai-ailor's wife a sailor's sta-a-a-ar should be.
A sailor's wife his star should be—"

The cracked voice of the old man held an undertone of utter contentment. To him, the house behind

represented more than the cheap, flimsy affair of boards and bricks that it was, and, as he worked, his voice rose higher and higher :

"Of all the wi-i-ives that e'er ye know—oh, oh,
Yea-O, my lads, Yea-O, oh, oh!
There's none like Nancy Lee I tro-o-o-ow,
Yea-O, my lads, Yea-O."

For to the Skipper, whose only home had been for years the steel hull of a battle-ship, this particular patch of ground, with the house behind it, represented well nigh the zenith of any man's ambition. Perhaps he would have qualified it by saying any *old* man's ambition, for the Skipper was far too thoughtful ever to mistake his own feelings for the feelings of others, and he knew that these things, which represented peace and contentment to him, were, to his son, only shameful reminders of his inaptitude and lack of ability.

The old man raised his face for a moment from his labors, and the song died as he reached heavily into a hip pocket to bring out a gaudy blue handkerchief with which he thoughtfully mopped his wrinkled forehead.

An artist would instantly have wanted to pose the old fellow ; he so completely personified the Old Man of the Sea. Even the most unimaginative of his acquaintances felt drawn to this ancient mariner, for there was that about him which breathed of open spaces and rushing water ; of high running

waves and the hiss of the foam that curls about the bow of a plunging battle-ship. It is impossible that any one could, even for a moment, mistake his calling.

The wrinkled tanned forehead rose sheer from his eyes into the short tangle of gray hair that crowned his head. An aquiline nose, set midway between the deepest of far-seeing blue eyes; lips that curled pleasingly, somehow, and a chin in keeping with the forehead completed the picture of "Skipper" MacDonald.

Scrupulously clean shaven, and spick and span even in the overalls which he wore while at work, it was evident that the Skipper had brought with him from the naval service his own idea of what constituted the shore appearance of a retired man-o'-war's-man, and that he lived up to it.

The handkerchief restowed in what the Skipper termed his "stern pocket," the shrewd little eyes gazed thoughtfully in the direction of the street, and, with a sharp squint at the nearly hidden sun, the old man rolled, with a gait that spoke of the deep sea, to the straggling picket fence.

The Skipper expected company, nor was he to be disappointed, for he had scarcely taken his position near the fence, when, from the cross-street, there loomed a huge figure slowly making its way to an objective; an objective that the Skipper knew immediately was the home of the MacDonalds.

The approaching figure was colossal, and bore down on the house with a slow walk that resembled nothing so much as the philosophically calm deliberation which characterizes the gait of the Florida alligator. Had the Skipper known of Rabelais he would unquestionably have been struck with the thought that here came no less a personage than the great Gargantua himself. Nor would the thought have been malapropos; for the big man who drew near the gate seemed to tower above the Skipper much in the manner that a dreadnaught towers over the slim torpedo boat.

His size was Doctor Edward Lester's greatest affliction. And he did not fail to inform all and sundry of the mournful fact. But there were those in the city of Jacksonville who would be almost reverent in their mention of the man's name. His ability was unquestioned and outstanding. As chief physician of the Harris Hospital of Ortega none questioned his pronouncements nor his diagnosis, and when he could be prevailed upon to undertake the care of a private case; lucky was the patient whose bedroom trembled beneath the heavy tread of Doctor Lester.

His salary from the hospital, whatever that might have been, seemed to suffice him for all his needs, for he was never known to send a bill. The fact that the great majority of the private cases he under-

took were among the poor of the city was characteristic of the man.

He dressed, as he not infrequently informed friendly critics, for the sole reason that he should not resemble a large and naked hippopotamus, and it was not difficult to believe him, for his clothes hung loosely upon his large figure, and, from the very moment he donned them, seemed wrinkled out of all recognition. One coat pocket bulged invariably with crumpled packages of a cheap cigarette; the other with the twisted frame of an ancient stethoscope.

He greeted the Skipper lugubriously. "Mornin', Captain. What does the compass say of the binnacle?" The doctor's idea of things nautical was somewhat nebulous, and the never failing greeting received its ever same reply.

"Due north she is;" the Skipper chuckled as the huge man squeezed through the gate.

"Whew!" wheezed the doctor. "Ain't this fine weather for October; ain't it?"

He seemed to dare the little Skipper to dispute him, something the old man had not the remotest idea of doing.

"Pretty hot," the Skipper admitted; "pretty *blamed* hot." Which is as near as the elder MacDonald ever came to the use of the fabled language of seamen.

The doctor rested his huge bulk on the stairs leading to the porch.

"Raymond in?" he queried. Then, without waiting for an answer to his question: "What kind of a night did Clara have?"

"Pretty fair," the Skipper's blue eyes clouded. "Not so good as it might have been."

The doctor grumbled something unintelligible. "Lot an old sea hound like you knows about it."

The Skipper's cracked voice broke into a laugh. "What do *you* know; you weren't here. Probably gadding about with the little Miss Watkins, eh?" The old man chuckled over his pleasantry which only the great friendship between the two dissimilar men permitted. "For your size, you're about as bashful as they make 'em."

He skipped back nimbly as the physician aimed a pondrous blow in his general direction.

"Wow—lookit 'im. Jumbo gets rambunctious."

And the big doctor chuckled an accompaniment to the Skipper's laugh.

Together the two men entered the house, and, once inside, the doctor deposited a small and sadly battered black case on the table and turned to the flight of stairs that led upward. "I'll go right up, Captain," he announced heavily. "And if you'll keep your anchor safely anchored, or whatever you call it I'll be back in a few minutes."

The Skipper, left alone, eyed the doctor's little

black bag and his seaman's pride revolted at the sight of the rusted brass locks and hinges.

It was the business of but a moment for the old man to dig up, from some recess known only to himself, a half bottle of some sticky, white fluid, a half-dozen rags and a bottle of oil, and, long before the heavy tread of the doctor was heard on the stairway, the locks, hinges and clasps of the bag gleamed brightly, while the little Skipper sat at the table polishing industriously one of a brace of somewhat antiquated revolvers.

Young MacDonald glanced inquiringly into the room, noted the doctor's bag on the table, and entered.

His greeting of the elder MacDonald was an affectionately proprietary slap on the shoulder: "How's tricks, dad?"

The Skipper smiled his pleasure. "Pretty good, Ray; yes, pretty good. Any news?"

He did not need the young man's shake of the head to tell him that the answer would be in the negative, and, to make conversation, he hurried to another question:

"What happened last night, Ray? Out pretty late for a youngster, weren't you?" To the old man nine o'clock still meant taps, and, consequently, any time later than that was classified generally as "pretty late."

MacDonald dropped into a chair by the table and toyed aimlessly with one of the revolvers.

"When I left, dad, I wanted to go out to Ortega to see him." It was evident that there was no need to elucidate the pronoun for the Skipper's benefit. "I called up but he wasn't there. I talked with Irma a minute and told her we'd moved out here and that—oh, well, nothing else much."

"Still, sonny," the Skipper's voice was mildly suggestive, "Clara might be right, and it may be a good plan after all to sort of see if you can't talk to him."

The young man twisted the gun thoughtfully in his hands, a frown drawing his eyebrows scowlingly across his forehead.

"Better get it out, son." The Skipper's voice was softly encouraging. "What's troubling the boy?"

"Well," young MacDonald breathed deeply. "I told Irma that I was going to get Ranson of the *Times-Union* to show up Avery, and she said she'd help if she could."

"Game little sport, ain't she?" The Skipper's voice held a note of enthusiasm, but MacDonald only nodded absently.

"I started to the *T-U*, but I thought it over and saw it wouldn't do. Besides I met Haily of the Power Company and he suggested that he'd have some important installation work for me pretty soon—any day now——"

"Say, ain't that great?" The Skipper bubbled over joyously. "Things are sure comin' our way, sonny; just sit steady and don't rock the boat."

Raymond MacDonald smiled with open affection at his father's enthusiasm. "All right, dad; I believe you. But let me finish——"

"Sure, go on. I didn't go for to interrupt;" the old man broke in.

"I did go out to Avery's later."

"Did you see him?" The excitement in the Skipper's voice apologized for his interjection.

MacDonald nodded. "Just a repetition of the same old thing, dad. There, now"—as he noted the expression in the old man's blue eyes—"don't go worrying about anything. I didn't really intend to say anything about it. It's of no consequence. What do we want from Lucian Avery anyway? And, besides, I'll have that Power Plant position back again in no time at all."

The Skipper's nature wasn't the kind to remain downcast in the face of anything that seemed promising, and he smiled cheerfully as both men turned to the stairway where a heavy tread heralded the doctor's descent.

To the usual question in their eyes the doctor only hunched his heavy shoulders professionally and with seeming indifference, although his attitude did not, for a moment, fool the old Skipper.

"No change," grumbled the man of avoirdupois.

"She'll do as she is." He turned his heavy features to the younger MacDonald. "Better go up and cheer her up a little; that's what she needs mainly."

And as the young man acted on his suggestion, the doctor's eyes fell on his glistening bag, and took in also the pleased expectant expression on the Skipper's face.

"Well, you old salt-water reprobate:" the big voice boomed. "I guess you're satisfied now that you've ruined my bag."

Both the Skipper's hands went up in mock dismay. "However did you recognize it? I'll bet that's the first time that brass-work's been shined since the year one."

The doctor dropped into the chair vacated by Raymond MacDonald and gazed thoughtfully at one of the revolvers on the table. Then, as though suddenly become aware of the weapon, he picked it up and inspected it carefully:

"Where'd the prehistoric hardware come from?"

The Skipper bristled. "Pre—prehistoric, is it? Say, Mister Fatty, that's one of a brace of the finest little thirty-eights *you* ever saw, even if you don't know it!" He seemed really ruffled as he reached out to take the revolver from the big man, and the doctor squinted at the overalled little figure indulgently as the man placed the two guns carefully on a small table against the wall.

"Maybe so, maybe so;" agreed the doctor. "But

you'll wear all the shiny spots off by polishing them so much."

The Skipper was instantly mollified. "They do shine, don't they? Pass an admiral's inspection, those guns would." He resumed his seat and leaned toward the doctor, a sudden earnestness creeping into his eyes.

"How does Clara look to you to-day, Lester?"

And the doctor was equally as serious as he glanced quickly at the stairway, then back at the little Skipper.

"Bad, Captain, mighty bad. Oh, there's no immediate danger, just as I've said right along. But she ought to go to ————" the doctor waved a pudgy hand to finish the sentence.

"Yes? Where?" The old man hung breathlessly on the big physician's words.

The doctor pondered a moment. "Only this, Mac; what she needs is a specialist. I'm too much of a dub. She needs one of the great big fellows; there's one in Paris I have in mind; he'd be able to do something."

The Skipper nodded. No one knew better than himself how remote was the chance of securing a specialist's attention for his daughter-in-law.

"And there's no *immediate* danger?" His query was anxious.

"None at all; not a little bit." The doctor's face brightened. "She'll weather it all right, and demne,

you never can tell! Any day may bring a sharp turn for the better."

The Skipper's face brightened marvelously at the doctor's assurance. He did not reason, as the doctor well knew, that any day could also bring a sharp turn for the worse in the invalid's condition, nor was it the doctor's intention that he should know, so he hurried to his next remark:

"Miss Watkins been out to see you here?"

The doctor knew that this question would bring an answer that was most probably a joking one, and he wasn't mistaken. Immediately the Skipper grinned broadly:

"You might as well toddle along," he suggested, "she's not coming till afternoon."

The doctor grumbled. "I'd give a mint, if I had it, to get her away from out there. You know," he leaned confidentially nearer the Skipper, "the more I see of that man Avery the less I like him."

Here was a subject in which the Skipper was letter-perfect to say the least.

"The *less* you like him? Honest, Doc, if it weren't for some mighty religious scruples I'd take real pleasure in makin' him eat poison; yessir!" The Skipper's words, so at variance with the personality of the man, startled the doctor.

"Aw, say," he grunted, "you must've been thinkin' things over again. How many times have I warned you," he continued chidingly, "that

you're in no condition to bother about anything but just livin'."

The tanned wrinkled face of the old man grew slightly paler. "All right, Lester, all right;" he defended quickly. "I'm not thinkin'; honest, I ain't. I couldn't help sayin' that though—I just couldn't."

"Do you think," the doctor continued, "that he knows anything about Clara's condition?"

The old man nodded positively. "Ray told him yesterday."

"Huh?" The doctor looked his astonishment. "Raymond see him? Where?"

"At his house."

The doctor pondered this. "Anything come of it?"

"Ray wouldn't tell me. Just said the same old thing happened." A sadness dimmed the blue eyes of the Skipper. "Guess it's all my fault," he continued meekly. "If I could find a way to go away from 'em, they'd be all right. But I can't, Lester. I can't leave the boy—now can I?"

"Of course not." The doctor came heavily to his feet. "That's the nuttiest idea you ever had in your life. Say—" the big man seemed to be working himself into a righteous anger: "I don't want to hear any more of that kind of talk," he threatened. "You just sit still and keep mum. Let Raymond do the worrying, and, believe me, youngster,"— the

doctor began to chuckle inwardly at his own wit in suggesting it— “if ever you pull anything like that I’m goin’ to quit the case; quit it cold. It’s bad enough now, and how do you reckon I’d be able to manage without you? Huh? How do you reckon Clara and Raymond could?”

The old Skipper nodded raptly. He seemed pitifully anxious to be assured that his actual presence was indispensable.

The doctor turned on the threshold: “And thanks for polishin’ ’em up,” he grunted, swinging the bag.

Then he turned down the narrow walk, squeezed himself thoughtfully through the gate, and lumbered to the street-car line, muttering vague threats against the name of Lucian Avery.

He stopped on the corner, carefully lighted a cigarette and continued his course, forgetting the street-car stop:

“Just the same,” he grumbled aloud, “I’d like to give him a nice large dose of—of arsenic.”

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS

THE word had gone out at Headquarters Building it wasn't particularly healthy for any one to mention the name of Avery in the hearing of Inspector Herndon. Speculation as to the inspector's sullen humor took the form of various broad jests at that official's expense. Some had it that Avery had summarily commanded the inspector to drop the investigation of the matter of the telephone call; others declared that the inspector, desiring to show his ability, had reasoned the thing out and gone to Avery with the name of a man who had proved to be one of Avery's intimate associates.

And, although none of the supposed reasons even approximated the exact truth, Lucian Avery occupied more than a fair portion of the inspector's thoughts as he sat glowering in his private office, chewing viciously on what had been an excellent cigar, and scowling over his lack of ability to concentrate his thoughts on the matter before him.

And into this surcharged atmosphere stepped Hugo Miller, dapper and cool, and smiling through

the glistening horn-rimmed spectacles that he affected.

The inspector's greeting was scarcely more than an uncivil growl, but Miller nodded pleasantly as he pulled forward a chair and extended a fresh cigar.

"What's new, Mr. Inspector?"

Inspector Herndon took the cigar and muttered non-committally. Then he blurted: "What's the use? You people don't print it."

Miller looked his surprise. "The deuce we don't! What's up? You give me some dope and then just watch the head-lines, that's all."

The inspector only grunted and Miller assumed that no particular event was referred to in the official's accusation. He continued his effort to mollify the inspector.

"Great little town, all right," he commented, apropos of nothing. "Some mighty nice people in it, too."

The inspector frowned down this information.

"By the way, Mr. Inspector," Miller continued as though suddenly reminded, "did you ever see the half-page I had in the *Courier* in Washington on that case of yours last year?"

A light of interest dawned in the inspector's eyes. "A half-page about me?" He seemed already slightly reconciled to the presence of Miller.

"Yep. That clean-up you made of the bank-robbing crowd last year."

The inspector leaned back in his chair. Here it appeared was a young newspaper chap who recognized sterling effort when he met up with it.

"Oh, it was a pretty good case," he drawled slowly, forgetting entirely to mention that most of the thanks for the solution of the puzzle were due to the keen mentality of one Doctor Edward Lester. "Pretty good."

"I'll say it was," agreed Miller instantly. "Though it looked for a while as though you'd have to call for help from up North."

The inspector's smile was condescending. "It didn't take so long," he boasted, "and I've seen those up-North guys go flooie on a whole lot easier cases."

Again Miller made haste to agree. "Yes, so have I. As a matter of fact I've been able to help out a few of them now and then."

"Yeh?" The inspector was merely polite, not curious.

"Oh, yes," Miller went on, "I've done quite a lot of deductive work in my time; quite a lot. And made out fairly well, everything considered."

But the inspector displayed no interest in another's ability in the detective field.

"How about this telephone business, Mr. Inspector?"

Miller was afraid, for a second, that he had taken the wrong track in approaching the subject, or had

come upon it too suddenly, for the inspector's frown was again in evidence. But it soon drifted from his face and he extended a letter that had been lying, face-down, on his desk.

"Well, let's see if you'll print that," the inspector challenged.

Miller's eyes grew large as he read. The page before him was ordinary typewriter paper, typed and unsigned. No date line and no salutation began the note:

*"Lucian Avery will be murdered this morning.
This is just for your own information."*

Miller turned the paper over thoughtfully in his hands and gazed at the blank side showing only the slight perforation of the periods.

"I just saw Avery going to his offices," he volunteered.

The inspector nodded heavily. "Reckon you did. I called him up and he was there all right."

"Get this by mail?" Miller scented new complications in his recent deductions.

"Naw. That's the hell of it." The inspector was genuinely abashed. "The darned thing was laying flat on my desk when I walked in this morning."

"What?"

"I said it." The inspector relapsed again into his sullen brooding.

Miller kept his eyes fixed on the back of the

paper. "Written by an amateur," he commented finally, "on what I think was an Underwood."

"Amateur? How do you make that out?"

Miller tapped the paper with his fingers. "Periods punched through," he announced, "experts never do that. Only a person unaccustomed to the use of the typewriter has the hard touch that punches the periods and other punctuation marks through the paper." Miller delivered himself of these conclusions in a manner thoroughly satisfactory to himself and in accordance with his favorite detective's best precedents.

"Hell!" The one word was all that came from the inspector, but it was eloquent of that gentleman's opinion.

But Miller was unabashed. It was not his first experience with bungling officials.

"Avery know about this?"

"Yep. Says send him the note and keep quiet about it." Inspector Herndon plainly did not like the idea. "That about lets you out, too."

Miller considered. "Try to find out how this got here?"

"You talk like Jackson." The inspector's supreme insult ricocheted harmlessly from the reporter. He did not know Jackson. "Of course I tried. Nobody knows."

"Got a list of who dropped in on you this morning before you arrived?"

The expression on the inspector's face was one of deep disgust. "Lessee—Herrolds from the *Metropolis*, Wilkins from the First National, Lerner from Avery's place, young MacDonald"——the inspector checked off the names on his fingers and did not note the slight start of the reporter at the last name—— "Furring of the Traction Company, Hadley ——aw, what's the use? Just the regular crowd."

"Did all of 'em say why they wanted to see you? Did they leave any word?"

The inspector seemed willing to humor the reporter.

"Well, most of them, yes. Here's what MacDonald brought, by the way." The inspector delved into a desk drawer and brought forth a tiny, carved model of a sailing ship. "Say," he began enthusiastically, "know the Skipper?"

Miller shook his head. "Heard of him; that's all."

"Well, you get to know him." The inspector displayed more interest in the subject than in anything else heretofore mentioned, save, perhaps, himself. "He made this for the kid; pretty neat, eh?"

Miller examined the model from a distance. "Your kid? Didn't know you had one."

The inspector actually gurgled. "Say, I've got the world beat," he boasted. "Got a five-year-old that looks like a champ already. Legs like that Colossus guy I read about once, and a chest like

you see on a movie hero." It was plain that the inspector could become garrulous on occasion, and Miller made mental note of the fact that it was necessary only to appeal to Inspector Herndon's paternal pride to open the flood-gates of his speech. "The kid and the Skipper are buddies," the inspector continued, "and you ought to see the old man teach him drills! He'll be some more grandfather when he has a chance, believe me he will. That youngster of mine had actually rather see the Skipper comin' than me——what do you know about that?"

Miller took the little ship in his hand, but his thoughts were hardly on the workmanship of the really cleverly carved brig. "Bring it down himself?" he queried aimlessly.

The inspector, visualizing his youngster's face when he presented the Skipper's gift, shook his head: "No, sent it by young Mac, like I was tellin' you. Sorry I was out, too. Could 've sent the Skipper something. Got a gun for him—he's nuts on the subject."

Miller continued to examine the model with every show of interest. "Pretty work," he admitted. "Mighty pretty. Saw some of the old man's carving before. Miss Watkins, Avery's secretary, had a piece of it on her desk. Dropped in on her the other day to get some dope on Avery. Mighty fine little girl; know her?"

The inspector actually grinned. "Sure I know

her. But stay off, young man, stay off and away unless you want an elephant on your trail. Happen to know Doctor Edward Lester out th' Harris Hospital? Well, it wouldn't surprise a lot of people to hear that there's been a marriage in his family and that the name lost in the shuffle was Watkins."

Miller laughed and passed back the little ship. "What do you think of young MacDonald?"

The inspector turned sharply. "What's the idea?" He knew the question wasn't a chance one.

Miller merely shrugged. He was disappointed that the question had not gone over as unnoticed as he had intended it should; he felt that he must practise that casual tone a little more thoroughly. "Oh, nothing much. Ever occur to you, Mr. Inspector, that he must have it in pretty hard for Lucian Avery?"

The inspector didn't quite catch the drift of Miller's remarks, and he shook his head slowly: "Oh, I don't know."

"Well, you know. Lucian Avery's got it in for MacDonald anyway, don't you?" Miller made a chance shot and missed the target.

"No, I don't know it. Do you?" The inspector was positively not committing himself until he ascertained whither the reporter's rambling conversation was leading.

Miller became impatient. "Why the whole town knows it—or ought to." He nodded positively.

"You can just put it in your little book that Lucian Avery is laying for this MacDonald with a big brick."

"I should say," began the inspector judiciously, "I should say he had a right to be peeved. You seem to know the whole yarn about young Mac and Avery's niece. It's general property all right and young MacDonald seems to have acted somewhat like a nut."

Miller nodded. "That's what first started me thinking," he admitted.

"Thinkin'?" The inspector's tone was one of utter and entire lack of comprehension. "Thinkin' about what?"

"Oh, this whole case of Avery's;" Miller lightly denied reference to any specific subject. "Just generally, you know. Rather an interesting story, don't you think so?"

The inspector nodded.

"If I were in MacDonald's shoes I believe I'd be pretty sore," continued the reporter. "He's a good man, too, from what I hear—quite an engineer in fact. . . ."

"Don't know a darned thing about him, except that he's got a bird of a father."

"...and Avery's been on his trail quite steadily," continued the reporter, ignoring the inspector's interpolation. "Had him turned out of the Power Plant, I hear."

The inspector, always willing to listen, merely lighted his cigar and waited. He had already classified the garrulous Miller as harmless.

"Also, he's in a pretty bad way financially." Miller crossed his legs easily and leaned back in his chair. The expression on his face was one of casual interest in an agreeable chat, for Mr. Hugo Miller had his own ideas of what constituted the proper manner of approaching a subject.

"He recently moved out into Springfield, you know. A ramshackle sort of place, I understand. Must be pretty tough on his wife after Avery's house in Ortega."

The inspector's shrug might have meant anything from lack of interest to actual distaste for the subject. To Miller, however, intent on one idea, it meant nothing of consequence.

"By the way," he commented, skipping from his subject carelessly, "I suppose you know we tried to run down that phone call from the other end."

"Yeh—so did I," the inspector grunted. "Guess we could pool our findings and still have nothing."

"Oh, I don't know." Miller became too elaborately nonchalant. "One definite thing is that the man who did the phoning recently moved into the neighborhood of Roger's Drug Store on Walnut Street. That's something to begin on, isn't it?"

"Walnut Street?" The inspector seemed interested. "Say that's where——" He glanced

sharply at the reporter as he broke off the sentence. For a moment he thought seriously; the occasion seemed to warrant it, and the inspector began to see the reason for the reporter's rambling comments.

Miller saw the first sprouting of the seed, and quickly reverted to the subject of Raymond MacDonald. But he did it crudely:

"Know what young MacDonald's doing now?" he questioned.

The inspector, following his own train of thought, paid no heed to the query, and Miller continued:

"Just thought I'd ask. Think I know of something in the electrical line I can put him next to. You see I'm not particularly scared of Lucian Avery and _____"

"Say," the inspector cut in irritably. "Are you tryin' to *tell* me something?"

Miller laughed and laid on the table the note with which he had been aimlessly toying during the conversation.

"Why, no, not exactly," he disclaimed. "I came here to see if a little light couldn't be got on the subject from you."

"Well, there ain't." The inspector growled. The page of typewriter paper beneath his eyes had served the red-rag-to-the-bull purpose Miller had intended.

"And you can't even make a guess?" Miller was insistent. "I'd like mighty much to have an official

expression from you, Mr. Inspector. I think Avery'll let us go ahead with the story if he's approached in the proper manner."

"I don't guess; I leave that for the newspapers." The inspector succeeded in his attempt to be deliberately insulting, but the result on the reporter was negligible.

"Well," Miller laughed easily, "then my guess is as good as another's."

"Oh, you've got one, have you?"

"Why, of course I have. Didn't I tell you that I'm usually sort of interested in these—er—mysteries? And that note there makes me just about certain that I've guessed mighty near to the truth."

"Near to it ain't enough," warned the inspector out of his official knowledge. "You've got to have the goods on the man you try to grab off for a deal like this."

Miller nodded his head. "That's what I haven't quite got," he admitted. "But, listen—" he leaned forward in his chair and emphasized his remarks by tapping a cigarette against a case he had taken from his pocket, giving careful thought to his exact position and the proper manner in which the delivery of his conclusions should be effected.

"The man I have in mind, Mr. Inspector, lives in Springfield. He recently moved there from Riverside, and now lives on Walnut Street. The description furnished us, and furnished you, too, no doubt,

by the drug store people fits him except for one slight detail of no consequence whatever. Any one can put on a pair of glasses on occasion."

The inspector was tapping thoughtfully with a stubby forefinger on the desk before him.

"This man has all the motive in the world, mind you, and I'm not saying he isn't justified if he's only trying to scare Avery. Of course, no one has ever heard Lucian Avery's side of the story." Miller seemed to take it for granted that the inspector knew of whom he spoke.

"And there you have my entire guess. If it isn't a good one—then," Miller's voice was triumphant, "then find a better one. And just one more point: Raymond MacDonald wasn't far from the place the message came from."

The dogmatic certainty of the reporter's voice carried conviction to the sorely harassed inspector.

"And the letter?" It was his first concession to the newspaper man.

"Well," Miller leaned back as though his case was complete. "Think over your list of callers again, Mr. Inspector. Of those of your callers that were here before your arrival, whom would you naturally suspect? Remember, it *had* to be one of them; any other supposition won't hold water."

And the inspector nodded slowly as though confirming a thought of his own.

Miller rose to his feet. He was satisfied with

what he had accomplished. Once more he had demonstrated his ability to lead the authorities to the proper trail, and he would see that the *Times-Union* did not fail to mention the fact that "Mr. Miller of our staff, a young man whose excellent reasoning has, heretofore, been of great aid to the various departments——"

"What I don't understand," grumbled the inspector finally, "is why he lays himself open like that. Why didn't he bump him off first?"

Miller studied this a moment. "When an honest man turns crook, or murderer, Mr. Inspector," he spoke as one laying down an axiom of the criminologists, "there's no telling about his psychology."

But, long after Miller left, the inspector sat before his desk. "Now the only question is," he muttered to himself, "can he be pinched for it?"

He seemed to decide on a definite course of action, for he carefully folded the ominous letter, dropped it into his coat pocket and left the office and building.

A few minutes later he was impatiently waiting in the anteroom of Avery's private office, and, when finally he was permitted to enter, he had already become nervously irritable. Again the inspector's official dignity had been ruffled. It was usually he who kept others waiting.

Avery was busy, so the inspector was forced at once to the point of his visit.

It was typical of Lucian Avery that he should listen to the inspector's suspicions without so much as the blink of an eyelid. And when the inspector, following the example set by Miller, had made out an impregnable case against the younger MacDonald, the official dignity was entirely shattered by Avery's remark:

"You will keep these things to yourself, Inspector. And when *I* tell you to speak of them, then do it. At present I prefer to let matters run on as they are. As for the note——" He held out his hand and the inspector obediently handed over the folded paper.

Avery opened it with no evidence of interest, but this time even Inspector Herndon noted the sudden tightening about the mouth as the man read the two typed lines.

What the inspector did not know was the reason for Avery's reaching into a desk basket before him and comparing in his hand the typewriting of the note and letter from the basket. Nor did he know that the two were identical, even to the slight flattening of the letter "n" plainly visible in the inspector's note, nor that the letter with which the note had been compared was typed that morning in the study of Avery's house by his own secretary.

CHAPTER VIII

AN UNIMPORTANT VISIT

AN expectant smile played about the lips of Irma Watkins as she descended from the north-bound street-car and made her way toward the home of Clara MacDonald; the sort of smile that draws an answering one from the faces of passers-by.

Irma Watkins was exceedingly good to look upon; more than justifying Detective Jackson's descriptively enthusiastic: "A pippin." And, though Jackson might have been at loss to detail those features and qualifications that, in their entirety, constituted, in his language, a pippin, he would have been no less certain of the fact that the term applied to Avery's secretary, particularly on this early afternoon.

A smart, rakish little hat graced the auburn-haired Miss Watkins, a hat from beneath which escaped a vagrant curl that twisted intriguingly on her temple, almost touching one of the delicately thin eyebrows, from beneath which a large, wistful pair of brown eyes smiled out. The red lips, curved now smilingly, gave her that enchantingly expectant air that en-

deared her to her friends. She appeared to be hurrying to some pleasant rendezvous, and her tiny slippered feet pattered lightly on the rough pavement.

The subject of her thoughts was, at that particular moment, however, busily engaged with the fever chart of a patient in the contagious ward of the Harris Hospital several miles removed across the city, entirely oblivious to the fact that he was being envisioned in the mind of this entirely charming bit of femininity.

The big man was thoughtfully snapping a thermometer in his fingers, and he gazed down at the small bed watching keenly the light fluttering of the eyelids of the patient.

When he stooped with the thermometer, the girl on the bed opened her weary eyes and tried to smile at the heavy face above her. Obediently she opened her mouth, and the doctor sat clumsily on a small stool at the bedside as he took a startlingly thin wrist between his pudgy fingers.

When he finally held the bit of glass against the light and twisted it between his fingers, he shook his head slowly as the mercury flashed against the glass. Laboriously he made an entry on the chart, stooped over the bed and patted the girl encouragingly on the shoulder.

"You'll be getting along one o' these days soon," he muttered. "Just see if you aren't."

The patient smiled wanly. "Thanks, Doctor." She took the big hand between her own transparent fingers for a moment, then released it gently, and the huge physician, beckoning the nurse, turned to the doorway.

"Watch her closely this afternoon," he ordered briefly.

The nurse nodded. "Has she any chance, do you think?"

For a minute the doctor's face clouded. "I'm afraid not," he muttered heavily. "I'll try to be with her most of the afternoon."

The nurse raised a protesting hand. "But, Doctor, you've been here all night and——"

The big man smiled wearily. "Well, that's my job, isn't it?"

Tears came into the woman's eyes. "It's not your job to work yourself to death over every stray waif that the wind blows into your arms. What would have happened had you not passed her on the street—had she not followed you?"

The history of the patient was well known in the hospital. She had been brought in one evening, several days previously, by the doctor himself. To the superintendent he had told the story of the girl's accosting him on the street. Something in her voice had made him hesitate, and, beneath a sputtering arc light, he had seen the unmistakable handwriting across her face.

Who she was no one knew, and cared but little. Only the big doctor had spoken to the outcast and had sat with her night after night fighting the battle which he knew he could but lose.

The nurse, frightened at her own words, turned blindly into the room. There was that in the tired doctor's face that caused the tears to come into her eyes, and when she entered the room she dropped beside the bed and taking one hand of the frail figure of the girl in her own, she stroked it gently. The unaccustomed caress caused the sick girl's breast to rise and fall under the stress of her emotion. She turned her face weakly on the pillow, and smiled at the nurse in understanding.

"He—he is an angel, isn't he?" The girl's voice was low and broken, but the picture it evoked in the mind of the nurse was that of a huge disheveled figure, the gray light of early morning falling across his heavily creased features as he sat slumped far down in a chair, his eyes gazing steadily at the cruelly frail outlined figure on the tiny white bed.

The nurse did not answer. Instead she placed one finger lightly over the girl's pale lips.

"You mustn't talk, dear, *he* says you mustn't," and the usually prim, competent nurse turned to the window and gazed down on the drooping branches of the weeping-willows.

Had Doctor Edward Lester not long ago lost his heart to the little lady who tripped blithely down

Walnut Street, he would doubtless have capitulated immediately had he seen her at the moment of her entrance into the MacDonald home; the moment in which she cast an expectant glance toward the small table on which the doctor was wont to stand his hand-bag, and had he seen the tiny passing frown of unmistakable disappointment that puckered the piquant face bewitchingly.

The frown vanished almost instantly, however, at the greeting she received from the Skipper, who had raised his eyes from the eternal polishing of his beloved revolvers as she entered. Even the suddenly discovered inexplicable need of oil in a trigger-hinge went forgotten as the Skipper came to his feet in greeting.

"And how's the fairy?" His blue eyes bubbled over. "Honest, girl, I don't see how you can always look so—so"—the old man strove vainly for a satisfactory word—"so sweet."

And to Irma Watkins the compliment meant more than the tortured, highly flattering phrases which she was accustomed to hearing. She crossed the room to the old man, one hand extended, and stood for a moment laughing down into his eyes. She had that exquisite trick of standing very near to the person to whom she was speaking, and looking them straight in the eyes as though their presence was, for the time being, the one thing in the world. It was so entirely unstudied, this wide, trustfully atten-

tive gaze, that she seemed never quite fully to appreciate the effects of it.

The little Skipper hurried up the stairs before her, explaining proudly the arrangement of the house, and dilating upon the garden possibilities offered by the yards. The girl smiled as she listened to the old man who bustled busily into the room of Clara MacDonald; a room that had been with difficulty made fairly attractive.

The two women greeted each other affectionately. Their long friendship antedated the marriage of Clara to young Raymond MacDonald, and, in the days before her marriage, Clara had not infrequently confided in the younger girl her dreams and ambitions for her lover.

It was the one subject of which the sick woman never tired, and her eyes brightened perceptibly when the younger girl drew a chair nearer to that of the invalid.

"Have you seen Raymond?" There was an unaccustomed ring in the woman's tone when she mentioned her husband.

A bright shake of the head was her answer. "No, I haven't—not for——some time. He's entirely well, of course."

The invalid nodded brightly, and Irma waved an airy farewell to the Skipper who had suddenly remembered the need of oil in that trigger hinge.

"Of course, he's well." Clara MacDonald smoothed a fold in her negligee mechanically. "I'm the only poor sport in this family." There was a wistful plaintiveness in the words that explained the sudden endearing gesture of the younger girl who caught the thin hands of the invalid in both of hers.

"But remember what you've got," she chided. "There's Raymond himself, and the Skipper of course, and there's——"

A blush ended the sentence and Mrs. MacDonald smiled knowingly. "And Doctor Lester," she finished, nor did the younger girl deny the charge that, to her mind, Doctor Edward Lester was well worth many things.

"Certainly," she laughed to cover her confusion, "there's a lot to be thankful for—a lot of the doctor, I mean."

But Clara MacDonald was not deceived by the laughter nor the girl's rejoinder.

"Why don't you, Irma?" The pale Mrs. MacDonald eyed the rosy-cheeked girl. "Why don't you do it, Irma?"

And, however cryptic the question may have sounded, Irma Watkins shook her pretty little head.

"Not yet, Clara," she answered lightly. "I want to be sure—oh, so very sure."

"Of what?" The invalid could not seem to understand. "Surely, dear, you *know* that he simply worships you."

The girl bit her lips and nodded. "Perhaps that's it," she began. "Perhaps it is because he does worship. Sometimes I'm very cold on the pedestal, Clara. And I wonder if he would worship if I were less—just a little less perfect than he thinks I am."

"But you aren't; you know you aren't;" the invalid expostulated. "Of all the queer things!"

"I knew you wouldn't understand," laughed back the girl lightly. "I just knew you wouldn't. You're so absolutely tied up in Raymond that you can't think of another thing; can't even understand people having healthy, normal doubts."

"But I do understand; I assure you I do, Irma. Only, only—well I *don't* quite, then. What do you mean, dear? Tell me."

Irma Watkins shook her head. "All the explaining in the world wouldn't help, Clara. I just don't know, that's all. He is always so very attentive, so hopelessly and so lovably clumsy and dear that I just—I just can't talk to him about it, that's all."

"But he loves you, dear; you know that."

The girl nodded. "Yes—" she hesitated. "But would his love be the same if I were—if I were—" she cast about in her mind for an example: "if I were like that poor little child he picked up on the street."

"Why, Irma!" Mrs. MacDonald was shocked. "You couldn't be like that; you simply *couldn't*."

"Of course not, silly." The girl turned rose-red

at the thought. "But just suppose I *was*, do you think that he would still——"

The sentence went unended for the Skipper poked his tousled gray head into the door. "Raymond been in?" he inquired.

The women shook their heads and the Skipper entered the room. "Guess he must be out to the doctor's laboratory," he speculated. "I'll call up and see," he offered. "Haily down to the Power Company just called up and asked me to steer him down that way." He nodded with a pleasant smile to Irma; "Sounds like real business, don't it?"

And Irma agreed enthusiastically that it did. Whereupon the Skipper took his departure and was heard, a moment later, carefully making his way down the steps.

Clara MacDonald did not revert again to the subject of her visitor's affection for the huge doctor; instead the women talked of young MacDonald, until, finally, with a little laughing shrug Irma rose.

"Of course, dear," she smiled down at the woman in the chair, "I could stay here and talk of that paragon husband of yours all the afternoon, but I'm a poor, misunderstood working girl;" she made a pretty little *moue* as she glanced at her wrist-watch, "and I'll almost certainly be late for the Dragon as it is. Don't get up, dear. I'll find the way down all right."

She embraced the woman in the chair and gave

her a loving little shake. "Don't worry, dear, you'll be all right the very first thing you know. Remember, he's quite a wonderful doctor!"

And she ran lightly from the room before the older woman could reply.

During the long ride to Ortega Irma Watkins considered the question with a pretty intent expression on her face. Just why didn't she marry the big, good-natured, unquestionably capable physician? And she was honest enough to admit that no satisfactory answer presented itself for her consideration; none that she had not already considered. Certainly affection was there—for in all her parentless life there had never been a man who even approximated in her affections the place held by the hulking medico. An exquisite little frown dawned between her eyebrows. Why wasn't she sure? And, when the street-car reached its destination, there still had been no answer to the question.

So she walked slowly in the bright sunlight, swishing the golden-headed jonquils with her white parasol, and, still pondering, let herself into Avery's house, entering from the east door which led directly into the small study adjoining the library and in which she worked.

Here her thoughts were interrupted by the voices that came to her from the library. It was impossible not to hear them, and, for a long time, as she sat before her tiny desk she was listening half-con-

sciously to the voices of the two men who were talking.

Avery's voice first forced itself into her consciousness. He was speaking in short crisp sentences outlining the last of his powerful deals to his listener and drawing conclusions that pointed to still another developing scheme. From the text of Avery's remarks the girl gathered that the stage was nearly set for the beginning of another gigantic play at which Avery, the master of the show, would once again set the puppets to dancing the dollars into his hands.

Slowly she doffed her hat and fluffed her hair unconsciously before a small mirror, still only half-listening to the conversation that went on in the other room: now the voice of Avery rising sharp and incisive and now the voice of Lerner, smooth and unctuous. Harry Lerner's voice had, for the girl, a peculiarly pleasing quality; though Irma Watkins had always been open in her plain dislike of the lawyer. Perhaps it was because she knew so much of the inner workings of the machinery which moved the Avery affairs, and of the manner in which Lerner conducted those portions assigned to him.

She began to page absently over a sheaf of letters on her desk until Avery's voice rose higher in what seemed to be a harsh command. She heard the

name MacDonald mentioned in a rough threatening voice, and, thereafter, she listened openly.

Avery's need was not unusual. A certain strip of land that split the newly proposed subdivision had to be secured. Of course, the holders, knowing nothing of the plans of the syndicate, would sell; that was obviously the thing for them to do. The question only was how much should be offered to secure the land. The price could not be made too high or it would arouse suspicions; yet it must be high enough to insure the fact that the property would pass immediately into the hands of whoever was acting for Avery. As it lay, the land's value was negligible, but to Avery it was essential, and, with the projected streets and paving, the street-car lines and the building, the modern sewerage and the improvements anticipated under Avery's development, this particular bit of property assumed large proportions.

For a moment the listening girl wondered at the discussion. She knew how many times before Lerner had quietly purchased such land as was necessary to Avery, and how uncannily the lawyer had been able properly to gauge the owner's price. And it was some time before she learned that the holder of the title to this particular plot in question was Clara MacDonald, and that this property formed part of an inheritance from her mother.

"But I can't do it; I *can't*." There was a nuance

of sincere earnestness in the lawyer's usually careful voice.

"You can't, eh?" Avery's voice was harsh. "And why not, may I ask?"

Then followed something unintelligible to the waiting girl, and Avery's voice again:

"Five hundred dollars is the limit you will offer." The brittle voice grated. "Not another cent on your account or mine. Understand?"

For a moment there was silence. Then the lawyer blurted: "But, good lord, man! Haven't you any consideration at all for your own? We could give five thousand and make no difference in the ultimate profits. And, if you can benefit her why not do it? God knows, she needs it bad enough!"

The man's voice broke off, and the girl could almost visualize the frightened expression his face bore at his own temerity. Never before had Lerner spoken in this manner to his chief. And she began to feel a little sorry for the lawyer, knowing as she did, that he could not very well tell Avery the reason for his sudden distaste of his own actions. The girl suspected very shrewdly that Harry Lerner still loved Clara MacDonald, although he never gave the slightest intimation of the fact.

The silence that fell was menacingly formidable and lasted for such a time that the girl became frightened. She did not know that Avery had sat silent throughout the lawyer's outburst, and con-

tinued to gaze straight before him, his jaws hard set in a stubborn line, making no answer.

And Lerner weakened. This silence was worse even than the threats he had more than half-expected. There was no word from Avery, but suddenly the lawyer knew that the promoter would not hesitate to use any weapon he possessed to force him to do what he desired done if he proved unwilling.

And the weapon that the lawyer feared reposed securely in the steel vault in the library wall; a weapon of a peculiar kind, for it was in the form of a sheet of note-paper, carefully folded, the surface of which was covered in writing in Lerner's unmistakable microscopic hand. The note bristled with the oft-repeated words "West Coast Central," and the name signed to the bottom of the sheet was Harry L. Lerner. So it was the lawyer who broke the silence. "All—all right," he muttered, and the girl had to strain her ears to catch his voice: "I'll get it for you immediately."

She did not hear Avery's reply, nor did she know in what manner the promoter had so silently and effectively overcome Lerner's passionate resistance.

The subject was not resumed. Instead Avery immediately reverted to the matter of transfer of titles, to his companies, of the properties already secured. From this the girl learned enough to make certain that the subdivision planned was on the south side of the St. John's River beyond the thriving

municipality of South Jacksonville, and almost midway to Atlantic beach.

For a very few minutes she seemed undecided. That she would do what she could to stop the transaction with Clara MacDonald was understood. She never for a moment questioned this almost unconsciously arrived-at decision. The question was only one of method. Her first thought was the Skipper, but this she discarded at once. In such a matter the old man's inexperience would make him worse than useless. The younger MacDonald, too, was impossible. She knew that his quickly aroused temper could not be held in check if he learned of Avery's plans, and she feared to disclose them to him, less for Avery's sake than for fear of what the young man might, in a sudden fit of fury, attempt to do.

She thought of calling Doctor Lester. There was a strangely satisfying sort of feeling in the thought of the doctor aiding her. Surely the big man could, somehow, prevent the transaction. But this plan, also, she was forced to discard. She knew immediately that Doctor Lester would insist on her leaving Avery, and she really feared that, after all, she might give in to his earnestness despite the uncertainty of her feeling toward him. And there was the question of right. She had no doubt of the doctor's code of morals. The strict ethics that governed his practise, governed also his daily life, and she foresaw the difficulties she would encounter in try-

ing to justify to him her really treasonable—no matter how worthy—action toward her employer. And, perhaps, down in her heart she did not want the doctor to learn that she was capable of such an action. Just why she felt ashamed at the thought of telling him she did not know. But the feeling was there and it would not be denied.

Finally she decided to call Clara MacDonald in person, and her hand went out to the telephone on her desk. But she did not lift the receiver. Across her mind flashed the incident of her call to the *Times-Union*; a call that had, evidently, been overheard by Avery in the adjoining library.

A rustling of papers from the big room told her that Lerner was preparing to take his departure, and she determined to risk it. There was no other way, for it was very likely that Lerner would go straight to the MacDonalds with his proposition. She forgot in the instant, that the lawyer was not exactly *persona grata* in the MacDonald household, and that he would, in all probability, send a substitute, or arrange the purchase by telephone.

The telephone receiver was at her ear when the buzzer beneath her desk sounded. If she did not answer the summons it was more than probable that Avery would look into the study to make certain of her absence before he sent a servant to her room.

The receiver dropped on its hook, cutting short central's: "Number, please?"

CHAPTER IX

SHADOWED

THE soft light that entered the library through the high windows in the south wall reflected golden gleams from the girl's hair as she sat at the library table across from Lucian Avery, her head bent over her note-book.

Avery did not fail to notice the nervousness that possessed his secretary as the dictating went on. He was deliberately slow and methodical in the manner in which he arranged and rearranged the papers on his desk, and he smoked thoughtfully for minutes on end watching the girl endeavor to hide her impatience.

In the silent spaces between letters she tapped her pencil softly on the page before her, or made odd, meaningless lines on the top lines of the pages of her note-book while one small foot beat an unconscious, thumping tattoo on the thickly carpeted floor.

Once she raised her eyes and found the gray eyes of Avery studying her fixedly, and, as she dropped her gaze again to the table before her, a blush rose to her face, staining it, in the soft light, to a color

more old rose than crimson, and spreading steadily under her self-consciousness until it included her small ears and the visible portion of her neck to the V-shaped cut at the throat of her soft waist.

Had she known the thoughts playing behind those keen gray eyes her nervousness would, doubtless, have been intensified, for, on his return to his house Lucian Avery had laboriously picked out on the girl's typewriter the sentences:

"Lucian Avery will be murdered this morning.
This is just for your own information."

And a comparison with the note given him by the inspector left no doubt in his mind as to where the first typed memorandum had originated.

And Avery was still puzzling for an explanation of the manner in which the girl had managed to have the note placed on the desk of Inspector Herndon, and what her possible motive could be for these unprecedented actions. These questions, as yet unsettled in his mind, accounted for the fact that he had, thus far, remained silent on the subject.

But he had not been idle. Before he left his office Lucian Avery had been in communication with Inspector Herndon, with the result that Detective Jackson had been detailed for such duty as Mr. Lucian Avery might call on him to perform, much to the detective's disgust.

The dictation period stretched out unduly. There

seemed to be a mass of accumulated work on the new deal, and the dictation filled page after page of the girl's note-book. To Irma Watkins it seemed that the flow of letters would never end, and her thoughts vacillated between her work and the picture of Harry Lerner approaching Clara MacDonald.

She could almost see Clara's surprise and pleasurable excitement as she accepted the offer made her by the lawyer, and the point of her pencil snapped from the pressure she suddenly exerted on it.

She went to the study to secure a new one and thought wildly for a moment of attempting to telephone then, but the silent figure of Avery in the library behind her prevented.

The last letter was finished after what seemed to her an interminable time, and Avery sat silent in his chair, covertly watching the girl as she impatiently paged through the note-book.

Finally he rose. "That's all, Miss Watkins. You need not mind about getting them out immediately—to-morrow will do." He strode across the room as he spoke, then, seeming suddenly reminded of something, turned again :

"Oh, just a minute, Miss Watkins."

The girl hesitated in the doorway of the study.

"Would you mind if you should go down-town this afternoon, stopping by the office to secure the Black Point portfolio? Just ask Willard for it, he will know which I mean."

A little light flashed into the girl's eyes. Here was an opportunity to get in touch with Clara MacDonald without risking the possibility of Avery's overhearing. And she jumped at the chance.

"I'll go immediately," she answered. Then, feeling that something more was needed, she added: "I—I wanted to do some shopping before the stores closed. Is there any particular hurry about the portfolio? I can bring it back immediately if you wish."

"Oh, no;" apparently Avery had already dismissed the matter from his mind. "Any time before dinner will serve," and he turned again to the littered table.

Scarcely had the door closed on the girl, however, when a grim little smile broke about the man's lips, and he took his position behind the draperies of a large double window set into one corner of the library: a window that afforded a view of the eastern and front approaches to the house.

And a very few minutes later he saw his secretary turn into the boulevard, and saw, further, the unmistakable figure of Jackson come loitering down the sidewalk. Whereupon Avery smiled unpleasantly and returned to the table.

When he had sent for Jackson, the only thought that had occupied his mind was the reason for the secretary's warnings. That she had telephoned Ranson of the *Times-Union*, and that she had written the note that was now in his pocket Lucian

Avery did not for one moment doubt. What he desired, primarily, to know was the reason for her actions. It was his opinion that the girl was being used merely as a pawn by some one or some combination of persons who were against him, and if this opinion was correct the fact that he had kept her in ignorance of his suspicions, and apparently had accepted her palpably untrue version of the telephone episode, might yet redound to his benefit. Once he knew for whom the girl was acting, and what the plans of his enemies were, it would not take Lucian Avery long to deal with the girl herself, and the smile on his face became slightly crooked over a thought that suddenly seemed to occur to him.

And the girl on the street-car was entirely too anxiously intent on her errand to give a thought to the bullet-headed individual who had boarded the car on the same corner, and who alighted at the same time she did, although from the other end of the car on the corner of Main and Forsythe Streets.

She hurried into the drug store on the corner, and when she emerged the bullet-headed gentleman again took up her trail. It was not difficult to follow, for the girl walked leisurely up Forsythe Street passed Laura and turned north on Hogan Street, stopping a moment at the green expanse of Hemming Park which faces the broad, rambling, home-like structure of the Hotel Windsor. She seemed interested in the dilapidated fountain, decorated by

swans of questionable cleanliness, and she hesitated by a bench as though half-decided to sit down while she contemplated the fountain which spurts a stream of clear water fan-wise into the Florida sunshine and gurgles pleasantly as it cascades into the basin built for it by the paternal city of Jacksonville.

A moment later she crossed Ashley Street and made her way toward the entrance of the St. James Building which housed the offices of Avery and Company and the half dozen subsidiary companies in which Lucian Avery's name did not appear.

And Jackson, speculating on the why and wherefore of Avery's sudden display of interest in the movements of his secretary, found time to grunt his disgust of his chief's warning to watch the girl closely, for there was "something up."

What that something was the inspector had not deigned to explain to his subordinate, for the very simple but all-sufficient reason that he did not know.

Avery had merely instructed the inspector to send Jackson to him, and had given the police official not the slightest hint of what he wanted with the detective. As a matter of fact, when the inspector learned that Jackson was to shadow Irma Watkins, he was scarcely less surprised than the girl herself would have been had she known it.

But other things were, at that moment, occupying the attention of Inspector Herndon, particularly the writing of some biographical data which Hugo

Miller had asked for to be used in a feature article in a Sunday issue of the *Times-Union*.

The inspector's face was screwed into a ludicrous expression of serious thought as he laboriously framed sentences on the paper before him on his desk, sentences which he tried vainly to fashion after the manner of his favorite author. The literary effort was not an unqualified success, and the inspector consoled himself with the thought that the article was to be embellished with photographs. There was to be one of himself, one of his home and one of William Herndon, Jr., *aetat* five, and just as the inspector had planned the proper pose in which he was to be shown, the telephone on his desk buzzed insistently:

"H'lo," he grumbled, his thoughts still busy with the possibilities of a double picture of himself: one showing him as he appeared in his uniform fifteen years ago, and one as he appeared now.

"Inspector Herndon?" The voice that came over the wire was sufficiently respectful, and the inspector gave it his attention.

"Yes, Inspector Herndon talking. Who's that?"

"I want some information, Mr. Inspector," the voice went on, not heeding the question. "Perhaps you can furnish it."

"Ugh!" The inspector's grunt into the transmitter was unintelligible and might have been construed to mean anything.

"I wanted to know," the voice inquired drawlingly, "that is, I thought, perhaps you could tell me if I asked you, for your department is the most vitally interested, and you should certainly have knowledge of it if any one has, and that's why I called to ascertain if———" The voice drawled the involved sentence and the inspector broke in gruffly.

"All right, get it out. I ain't got all day." He scowled at the telephone. "What's it you want to know about?"

"About the murder of Lucian Avery which happened an hour ago at his Ortega home!"

"Damn!" The inspector's ejaculation was belowed into the transmitter. "Say, who th' hell ———" but the click that interrupted his profanity told of a broken connection.

It was some minutes before the inspector was able to secure connections with the operator.

"Say," he bellowed, "who was that just talkin' with me? Where'd the call come from? Whassat? This is Inspector Herndon at Headquarters. Yes, the inspector. Yes, I just had a call. Oh, damn!" He snapped the receiver on to its hook, sputtering profanely at the operator's entirely respectful "I don't know—I'm very sorry, Inspector."

It was some time before the inspector recovered sufficient poise to turn again to the telephone, and in those minutes he had thrashed out the possibility

that this was another joke at the expense of either Avery or the Detective Department.

On the other hand, however, lay the portentous possibility that Avery really had been murdered, and the inspector knew but too well the sudden end that would come to his official career were it discovered that he had received such palpable warning of the event and had attributed so little importance to it that he had made no effort to run the matter down, and had not even endeavored to ascertain whether there was any truth as a basis for the strange telephonic message.

It took some time to get the connection with Avery's house, and a minute longer to receive the advice that Mr. Avery was in the library and would answer in a moment. The prim voice of the precise and masculine housekeeper grated on the inspector's nerves, and the request to have Avery put on the telephone immediately was not couched in the most polite language. The inspector had graver things to consider at that moment than the ruffling of the feelings of Mrs. Mallows.

"All right," the voice of Avery came distinctly over the wire. "Who is it?"

The inspector's feeling was one of almost indignation. He would have felt less put out had a sudden scream from Mrs. Mallows announced the finding of Avery's mutilated body.

"Is that Mr. Avery? Mr. Lucian Avery?" His voice went unpleasantly across the wire.

"Yes. This is Inspector Herndon speaking, isn't it?"

The inspector grunted. "Just got another call," he answered hurriedly. "Another one sayin' you was murdered an hour ago."

Avery's voice gave no indication of interest. "I think you can just forget it, Mr. Inspector," he suggested. "Is that all?"

"Yes." The inspector's voice snapped briefly and the immediately answering click told him that Lucian Avery had lost none of the brusqueness with which he dealt with public officials.

The inspector forgot even his autobiography as he scowled at the telephone, his thoughts coloring his face a violent purple.

"By the lord, I'll get him—get him on my own hook!" He bellowed the words to an empty room, and it was plainly to be seen that the unknown telephonist had incurred the personal anger of Inspector Herndon.

After paging swiftly through a telephone directory, the inspector again had recourse to the telephone, and the expression on his face was evidence enough that, in his own mind, the inspector was certain that he was on a hot trail.

"Hello—hello. That Mr. MacDonald's residence? I'd like to speak to Mr. Raymond Mac-

Donald, please. He hasn't come back? Oh, been out quite a while, has he? Can you tell me where I can locate him? The Power Plant in Springfield. Much obliged. No, never mind. I'll call him later on if I don't catch him there."

It was the work of only an additional minute to secure the desired connection with the Power Plant.

"That you, Haily? Say, this is Herndon. Yep. Oh, pretty well, how's yourself? That's good. Say, Haily, is young MacDonald around? Been gone half an hour? That's tough luck. No, nothing important. Thanks, I'll get him at home."

And there was a smile of triumph on the inspector's face as he turned from the instrument.

"I'll get Jackson to pick him up," he grumbled to himself; "pick him up at his house and stick to him like glue. I'll get the dope on him and teach him to know he can't come any funny business over *this* department, and I'll see whether he'll——"

And the inspector remembered that Jackson was not, at the moment, available. He punched the button beside his desk just as the glumly scowling Jackson again took up his position at the far end of the sycamore-lined walk that led to Avery's house from the boulevard.

The trail of Miss Watkins had led simply to the offices of Avery in the St. James Building, and back again to Ortega. And Mr. Jackson was ill-pleased. Something ought to have happened. In the light of

the inspector's warning that something was up, he had begun to expect even a physical battle.

But the girl disappeared into the house, and Mr. Jackson was not interested in her movements until she again emerged into the street.

The fact that the girl had gone directly into the library in which Avery sat did not interest the detective, nor did the fact that she gave Avery the portfolio she had carried from the office and that Avery took it silently. Could he have seen it, it is very doubtful that the detective would even have attributed any special importance to the glance from the gray eyes that followed his secretary from the room.

A few minutes later, however, a uniformed chauffeur approached the loitering detective.

"Name's Jackson, ain't it?" The chauffeur's voice was only half questioning.

The beetle-brows of Jackson drew into a frown. He considered the uniformed chauffeur before him and did not immediately reply. He was busy casting about in his mind for some accredited mode of action under the circumstances. It was the first time that he had ever been accosted by name by a stranger while actually at work on a case, and his little eyes gleamed suspiciously. The chauffeur appeared harmless enough, but appearances made small difference to the detective.

Fortunately the chauffeur did not wait for an answer. "Boss wants to see you;" he jerked a

thumb in the general direction of Avery's house and made his way across the boulevard, taking it for granted that the detective would follow. Which he did.

Avery met the man on the broad veranda.

"Well?" he questioned.

"Huh?" Jackson was still somewhat puzzled as to the manner of his having arrived on the front porch of the house. It did not behoove a member of Jacksonville's Detective Department to obey the chance orders of passing chauffeurs, and Jackson felt, somehow, that things were not exactly as they should be. Still, there seemed nothing definite, nothing tangible to object to, so he turned his full attention to Avery.

"Did the young lady go anywhere except to my office?" Avery was plainly impatient with the stupid Jackson.

"Oh," Jackson seemed suddenly to comprehend what was required of him. "Lessee: she got on the car here; rode down-town; didn't talk to anybody; got off at Main and Bay—no, that's wrong—got off at Main and Forsythe..." Once started properly Jackson was exceedingly methodical, and this sort of report appealed to his single-track mind. And Lucian Avery's impatience at the manner in which the information was conveyed was very poorly concealed.

"She went into Clarke's Drug Store," continued

Jackson, utterly and solely intent upon his business, "used the telephone there; went out to——"

"She did *what*?"

"What?" Jackson repeated. "Where was I at? Oh, yes: she'd come out of Clarke's after telephonin' and went——"

"Did you hear to whom she phoned?"

"Naw." Jackson looked his disgust. "I couldn't get in the booth with her, could I? I was gettin' a drink at the fountain, and then——"

"That will do." Avery turned away from the man. "You can report back to your chief," he flung over his shoulder.

It took Jackson some minutes to realize that Avery had gone and that the big front door had closed behind him. And, when he did realize it, a look of comical disgust dawned on his face.

"Now, dammit;" he complained to no one in particular; "now I'll have to write a report."

It was, of course, hardly to be expected that he should know that all that interested Lucian Avery of the unfinished report was the one outstanding phrase concerning the girl's entrance into the drug store; a phrase establishing the fact that Miss Irma Watkins had used a telephone!

CHAPTER X

A DEAL IN LAND

THE old Skipper, industriously whittling on what was destined to become an exact though tiny replica of the original whale-boat carried by U. S. S. *Monongahela* in the days of sailing war-ships, listened with a cheerful pleased smile to his son who was recounting the happenings of the day before.

"And what'd you say then, sonny?"

Raymond MacDonald smiled affectionately at the bent head of the old man.

"Why, I just simply told Haily that I would be delighted to come back to the Power Company, and it's the truth."

"And what'd *he* say?"

Young MacDonald laughed. "What should he say, dad? He told me he would be mighty glad to have me back on the old job again, and that he would have to worry less about details, with me there."

The fact was that Raymond MacDonald had been called into consultation by Haily of the Power Company for the very simple reason that that gen-

tleman knew the value of young MacDonald's electrical experience, and that, further, Mr. Haily felt no particular love toward Lucian Avery. The latter fact was due to various reasons, one being that, on several occasions in the past, Avery had endeavored to wrest control of the Power Plant from the hands of the very able Mr. Haily. The Plant furnished all electric current for the city of Jacksonville, for the subsidiary company that operated the street-car lines, and for many of the activities of the state, as far distant as Mayport and Green Cove Springs.

It is true that Haily had requested the resignation of Raymond MacDonald at Avery's suggestion, but it was only because the suggestion of the promoter caught him at a time when the affairs of the Power Company were in such shape that they could not well withstand another pitched battle with the Avery interests. The city council, too, at the time was threatening matters pertaining to franchises of the street-car company, and Haily had reluctantly bought immunity from Avery—and through Avery from the city council—by the dismissal of Raymond MacDonald.

This condition no longer existed, and Haily was eager in his efforts to secure the services of Raymond MacDonald in the extensive new installation work that was being projected; new installation that was necessitated by a proposed suburban line

that was to cover the distance of twenty miles that separated the city of Jacksonville from Atlantic and Pablo Beach. Nor was MacDonald less eager to grasp the opportunity.

The Skipper, however, was in no way surprised. His philosophy of life was antiquated, but his faith in his son unshakable.

"So you agreed to his terms?" The old man questioned.

"Hardly—he didn't make any. Asked me what mine were, and closed with me immediately."

The Skipper nodded his tousled head over his carving. "What'd I always tell you?" he challenged. "Didn't I say they couldn't get along without you; didn't I?"

The younger man laughed at this manner of putting it.

"It isn't that, dad," he denied. "It's only because Haily is now in position to tell Avery where he gets off."

But the old man was not to be denied his own interpretation. "No such thing;" he scoffed. "This chap Haily just figgered whether he'd rather go bu'st without you, or whether he'd rather have Avery on his neck, and he made fast to the least of his troubles. Plain as day, sonny, just as plain as day."

"What's plain as day?" The questioner boomed into the room and both men turned quickly to see,

framed in the doorway, and almost blocking that aperture completely, the Brobdingnagian figure of Doctor Edward Lester.

"Come in; come on in." The Skipper jumped quickly to his feet. "Come in and I'll tell you about it."

The doctor obeyed the injunction, setting his bag between his feet on the floor. "You aren't going to get another chance to ruin it," he grumbled in explanation.

And Raymond MacDonald laughed aloud at the sudden mock bristling of the old sailor.

"Never mind about that; never mind a-tall;" the Skipper's news, it seemed, was of more consequence than the doctor's sarcasms. "Raymond here's going back to the Power Plant."

"No?" The doctor seemed delighted. "When did this happen?"

"Fact." The old man nodded his emphasis, childishly delighted at the doctor's reception of the news. "Couldn't get along without him," he boasted with an affectionate glance at the young man; "just naturally couldn't get along without him, that's all."

"Say now, that's great dope. It sure is." The doctor seemed genuinely pleased. "That news'll do more for the little lady than anything I've heard in a coon's age. Tell her yet?"

MacDonald nodded. "Told her last night, and

she was mightily pleased, of course. Are you going up now? If you are I'll come along."

The doctor nodded and retrieved his case. Then he turned to the younger man, and the Skipper once more took up his carving.

"Tryin' to compete with the federal government in buildin' ships?" the big doctor mocked as he neared the steps.

"Never you mind," the Skipper answered, scraping busily on the tiny bow of the vessel; "it'll be as good as a government job anyway."

"Well, don't unreef yourself before I get back," the doctor called as he started up the stairs, and the Skipper's ancient laugh bubbled over as it always did when the doctor attempted nautical verbiage.

A few minutes later the two men returned to the room from above stairs, and, almost at the same time, the Skipper entered from the porch carrying a letter which he weighed thoughtfully in his hand.

He turned it over several times and peered interestedly at the superscription. Letters had always been in the nature of a mild excitement in the Skipper's limited experience.

"It's for Clara," he announced extending the missive to his son. "You take it to her."

The Skipper turned to the doctor as the younger MacDonald left the room. "You might's well sit down, even though Irma ain't comin' this mornin'."

"She's not?" The doctor's heavy features regis-

tered disappointment in no uncertain manner as he dropped heavily into a chair. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing—not a thing," the Skipper answered quickly. "She was here yesterday afternoon and she ain't called up since to say when she'd be out again. Maybe she's duckin' you," he suggested slyly.

The doctor did not deign to answer the suggestion, but seemed engrossed in the study of his shoes.

"You know, I think I've figgered out why she hangs on out there." The Skipper spoke as though conveying a precious secret.

"Yes?"

The old man nodded and turned to glance at the staircase before he answered. "I think she's sort of got a hunch that she'll be able to help Raymond and Clara one of these days—that's what *I* think."

The doctor nodded absently not realizing how nearly correct the Skipper's conclusion was. What was worrying the huge medico was evidenced by his next remark, and the Skipper was a little rattled by the sudden twist in the conversation. Usually he found the doctor only too willing to listen to his remarks concerning Miss Irma Watkins.

"Clara have a good night?" questioned the doctor.

The Skipper shook his head. "Think she was up most of the time," he answered honestly. "Guess Raymond's getting that Power job back sort of

flustered her. But that kind of news couldn't hurt her none, could it now?"

"It wasn't the news;" the doctor's heavy voice was unpromisingly gloomy. "I don't like the looks of things, Captain. There ought to be some way to get her away from here."

"Not—not right off? You don't mean she's in bad danger, do you?" The Skipper was very anxious.

"I'm afraid she is," grumbled the doctor. "There's no denying that every day makes her chance a little slimmer. Of course, you know, I don't mean that——"

The doctor stopped for he saw the Skipper's eyes grow large as the old man gazed toward the stairs. Half-way down, the younger MacDonald stood listening intently to the doctor's prognosis. His lips were slightly parted, and there was an expression of startled pain in the eyes that were fixed intently on the doctor.

A few rapid steps brought Raymond MacDonald to the doctor's chair.

"You don't mean," he whispered hoarsely, "you don't mean that she—that she might——" He could not bring himself to say it, and the Skipper, hurrying about the table, patted his shoulder with a skinny hand.

"There—there, sonny—don't take it that way, boy. Clara'll be all right a little bit later on. I

know she will. Come, boy; she's only a little upset at the good news you brought."

But the younger man's gaze remained fixed on the big physician in the chair.

The doctor came heavily to his feet, his eyes avoiding those of MacDonald. "It's better that you should know, Raymond," he began heavily. "Clara's in no immediate danger; don't let that thought scare you. But she needs careful and continuous attention, boy; the sort of attention only a specialist can give her."

"Yes—yes; whom do you suggest?" The eager question burst from MacDonald before the doctor had well finished speaking.

The heavy shoulders hunched expressively. "There's Pfister," he suggested, "and Bear and Trainer. All of 'em good."

As the men were named a hopeless expression rose to Raymond MacDonald's face. "But—but these men—you can't touch them without a fortune, Lester."

The doctor nodded heavily, almost painfully. "They would be expensive," he admitted. "Mighty expensive, but there must be some way you can raise a couple of thousand, isn't there?"

The Skipper had remained silent throughout the conversation. Now he broke in: "I—I know how—I know."

Both men turned on him instantly.

"I'll go to him," continued the old man childishly anxious. "I'll go to Avery myself, and I'll *make* him take care of her; I'll——"

The big doctor forced the little man into a chair.

"Don't," he began. "Don't you try anything. You let us worry about this."

The face of the younger man was set hard. "I can't go to Avery—I can't do it. He wouldn't listen, Lester, you know that."

The doctor nodded. Then he turned half-apologetically from the man to whom he was speaking:

"I'll write Pfister to-night," he offered. "I'll put the case to him, and see what he says. If it's just a matter of about two thousand there is no reason why I can't manage to get it for you."

The Skipper's eyes were gazing at the big man with an expression of utter fidelity, but Raymond MacDonald turned away from the offer.

"That won't be necessary, Lester," he blurted. "But—but thanks for the offer, old man. I'll see——"

Again the conversation was interrupted by a sound on the stairway, and young MacDonald hurried forward to help his wife.

A flush on the girl's cheek told the doctor that the exertion had been nearly too much for her, and he stepped forward to help her into a chair into which she sank breathlessly.

"Now don't scold, Doctor—please don't. I felt so—so very strong, and I just *had* to come down. Why, I haven't even hardly *seen* my own house."

The doctor nodded his heavy head. "'S all right," he grumbled; "I won't fuss if you'll go right back up again. Raymond, you carry her."

"Just a minute, please;" the invalid begged. "Look what I've brought down for you to see, dear."

Raymond MacDonald stared at the bit of pink paper in his hand; then as he gathered that he held a check for five hundred dollars, made payable to his wife and signed by Harry Lerner, he turned to her quickly.

For a moment he had the wild thought that Avery had taken this manner of helping his wife and that this check, sent through Lerner, was, perhaps, the beginning—the re-beginning of the girl's old allowance.

The woman's face met his gaze, and she was a little frightened at the expression in her husband's eyes.

"It's a payment, Raymond," she faltered; "a payment for my south side lot."

"South side lot?" Raymond repeated the words blankly. It was plain that he did not comprehend, and the old Skipper seemed equally at loss. Only the doctor's heavy face did not change expression.

He was keenly watching his patient, knowing that the excitement would leave its marks.

"Why, yes, dear," the woman hurried on; "don't you remember the lots you used to joke about? You laughed at me when I suggested that you build a house there," she reminded, "and I always said that——"

She stopped as a light of comprehension spread over MacDonald's face, and the Skipper, glancing from his son to his daughter-in-law in a vague effort to understand what it was all about, appeared relieved, although still as ignorant as ever.

"And Lerner gave you five hundred dollars for *that*?" MacDonald's tone was incredulous. "When?"

"Yesterday afternoon when you were out, dear. He phoned and asked if I would sell, and I told him yes. Why, the land wasn't worth near that much the last time we tried to sell it; don't you remember, dear? You tried and nobody seemed to want to buy it."

"Oh, yesterday afternoon. I remember." The Skipper nodded brightly. "That was the paper a boy brought for you to sign; the one you told me not to tell Raymond about."

The woman laughed quickly: "That was it, daddy; I wanted to surprise him. And I did. You *are* surprised; I can see you are."

MacDonald turned a puzzled face to the doctor. "What do you make of it, Lester?"

"Humph! What's it all about?" The physician reluctantly pulled away his watching gaze from the sick woman, and Raymond MacDonald explained:

"Clara has a piece of land about half-way to Atlantic Beach; nothing but a sand-dune and worth maybe two hundred at the very outside. That is, that is the price the real estate people have put on it, although no one was ever able to sell it."

"Well, who bought it?" The doctor wanted facts.

"Lerner, it seems; you know him, don't you?"

"Oh, well," the doctor shrugged, "if Lerner paid five hundred for it, you can just bet your life that he had it sold for seven hundred and fifty." The doctor's opinion of the lawyer was, plainly, not of the highest.

"Maybe," suggested the Skipper brightly, "maybe he was buying it for some one else?"

MacDonald shook his head. "I don't know of any one foolish enough to want that sand-dune, dad. I suppose it was a deed of some kind you signed last night, wasn't it, Clara?"

"I believe so, dear. Of course," she smiled at her husband, "I don't know a single thing about such things. Mr. Lerner phoned and when I told him that I would sell it to him for five hundred dollars, and that I was *so* pleased he wanted it, he told me

to sign the papers he was sending and he would mail me a check for the money."

MacDonald was still puzzled, but the Skipper's delight was evident.

"Five hundred picked up, I call it," he chuckled, and five hundred dollars meant but little less than the mint to the old man. "Picked up, just like nothing, that's what."

"The paper had a whole lot in it," Clara MacDonald continued, "about party of the first part and party of the second part—or something like that. Does that mean anything special, dear?"

And Raymond MacDonald, though still wondering at the reason for Lerner's sudden interest in the Atlantic Beach road property, echoed the doctor's rumbling chuckle.

"I'm afraid, dear," he chided mildly, "that business transactions aren't your long suit."

"Oh, I don't know," the Skipper answered for the girl. "She's cleaned up five hundred as pretty as ever I did see." To the Skipper the actual check meant the successful conclusion of any deal and he spoke the words "five hundred" with a fine air of businesslike carelessness as though sales of real estate were an unimportant and unconsidered item in his daily life. "What's the matter with that for business ability?"

The doctor agreed jokingly. "I think he has you there, Raymond," he smiled. "It doesn't sound as

though it were a bad deal by any means. But now," and he became professional again, "you'd better take her back up-stairs. And don't you dare come down again without permission, young woman;" the doctor wagged a minatory finger in the direction of the invalid: "Don't you just dare."

The telephone on the wall shrilled out and the doctor turned abruptly. Being nearest the instrument he lifted the receiver.

"Hello, there; who are you?" It was his invariable phrase when answering a phone call, and the person at the other end of the wire evidently recognized it, for the doctor's face suddenly creased in a wide smile.

"Oh, it's *you*. How's the heaven-born to-day? . . . What's that? . . . But I've been mighty busy, little lady, mighty busy. . . . Yes. Yes, at the hospital. The same patient. Yes, lady. . . . I'm sorry, little girl, but thanks for wanting to send the flowers. She won't see them any more. It was mighty thoughtful of you, Irma. . . . No. Of course I'm all right. What a question? I'm healthy as—as—as a bug! . . . Yes, of course, quite a big bug." The doctor shook with his laugh. "What's that? . . . You didn't want to speak to me. Well, I like *that*. . . . Clara? Yes, she's here, and I'll call her if you promise something. . . . What?" He chuckled again hugely. "All right, I'll call you in an hour, and, mind! you've promised to promise, remember."

He turned from the instrument.

"It's Irma," he explained needlessly. "Wants to talk to you, Clara. Better help her, Raymond."

The woman took the telephone while the doctor again stooped for his hand-bag. Deliberately the doctor smeared a thumb across the brass lock, and grinned at the expression on the Skipper's face.

Raymond MacDonald watched his wife with affectionate eyes as she held the receiver to her ear.

"Why, my dear, of *course* I wasn't out!" Clara MacDonald spoke into the transmitter, accenting her words in that pretty, affected manner that gave her the air of an overgrown child.

"Yes, I was here *all* the afternoon. . . . Really? You tried to phone me and couldn't get connection. Now *isn't* that queer. I *must* remind Raymond or daddy to see about it; I'm awfully sorry I missed your call, dear. Raymond was out, and, after you left I was just a *little* lonely. Was it something important, dear? . . . What? . . . Yes—yès. I *do* understand."

She made an effort to conceal her surprise and startled agitation as she turned from the telephone.

"What is it, Clara?" The Skipper's inquiry spoke for all three of the men.

"It—it was Irma," faltered the woman, and, as they nodded: "She—she said she couldn't tell me why, or *anything*, but I was to be sure and *not* sell my south side land to Mr. Lerner!"

CHAPTER XI

AND ITS RESULTS

LATE the following afternoon the Florida *Metropolis* in its final edition carried the seven column streamer that screamed the announcement:

Greatest Development Project Ever Contemplated!

And beneath it the heavily leaded account of the latest gigantic plan conceived by Lucian Avery.

The whole career of Lucian Avery was rehearsed from its origin, and the praise bestowed on this builder of cities came unstinted from the press. The masterly handling of the Ortega and Springfield developments was sketched at considerable length, and even the matter of the West Coast Central Railway—that least understood of all the Avery transactions—was touched upon by the writer.

The editorial page, under the caption of *Florida's Greatest Financier*, carried a three-quarter column panegyric of Lucian Avery, in which, it seemed, the very thesaurus itself had been swept clean of complimentary and superlative adjectives.

An inner page carried a map of the new project which was of a magnitude comparable only, in the words of the *Metropolis* writer, to the building of the Panama Canal and the construction of the East Coast Railway bridge across the Florida Keys.

The magnitude of the proposed development set the entire city gasping at the sheer effrontery of the mind that had conceived it.

Between the city of Jacksonville and the ocean lay a twenty-mile stretch of empty land. It was in the middle of this waste that the new city of Averytown was to be built. Already the city council had declared that Averytown would be included in the corporate limits of the city of Jacksonville at the first opportunity, and, simultaneously with the *Metropolis* story, came the announcement from the local Traction Company that surveying work would immediately begin on a long-projected, but often delayed, suburban line to Atlantic Beach, passing through Averytown.

Some few hopelessly optimistic real estate men scattered through the city after the *Metropolis* story broke. But their search was barren of results. Not a square yard of land had been overlooked by Avery's workers. The man was absolutely alone in his control of the approaches to the proposed subdivision, and of the land of the subdivision itself, together with an immense tract lying even beyond the proposed limits of Averytown.

Even the most humdrum of citizens could see the tremendous possibilities of the scheme, and real estate prices across the river, in the municipality of South Jacksonville, sky-rocketed in consequence.

Some pessimistic calamity howlers predicted that the inadequate ferry facilities afforded to cross the St. John's would mitigate against the success of the venture, but, before the final page of the *Metropolis* had been reached, even these few pessimists were silenced by the news that the fabled Acosta Bridge—which had come to be a byword in Jacksonville and Duval County politics—had actually been definitely assured.

Lucian Avery had overlooked nothing; not a single detail of the stupendous plan had been slighted, and the value of the undertaking to the city of Jacksonville was incalculable.

Raymond MacDonald learned the news from the *Metropolis*. His day at the Power Plant had been full of plans and the laying out of the work of the immediately near future, and, as he left the Springfield Plant and turned the corner of First and Main Streets for the purpose of boarding an out-bound car, his mind was still full of certain matters pertaining to a new type of turbine.

He dropped into a vacant seat by a window, and almost subconsciously picked up from the empty seat beside him, a copy of the evening paper.

The street-car traversed several blocks before

MacDonald grasped the full import of the heavy, black head-lines, and it was only after he had read half-way through the story and had come upon the map of the new addition of Averytown that the whole thing lay clear before him.

The black edges of the map merged into one line and blurred blackly before his eyes. For a moment all that he seemed to see was a narrow tract of sandy land; a tract that had been his wife's—a tract that split through the dead center of Averytown.

Then his eyes took in the columns of figures beside and beneath the map. The enthusiastic scribe of the *Metropolis* had not stuck quite so close to the facts as might have been considered necessary for a conservative journal. For a story of its type, however, he had been sufficiently accurate, although it was evident that he could have laid no claims to being a student of finance or a statistician of very great, outstanding ability.

MacDonald's eyes grew hard as he realized the potential value, to Lucian Avery, of the particular plot of ground for which Lerner had paid five hundred dollars. He did not fully grasp, even after trying to read the buoyant prognostications of the *Metropolis* scribe, just what value the property had overnight acquired, but he realized that the present market price of this same parcel was the answer to his unanswerable money questions. Here would have been enough, and more than enough to assure

his wife that medical attention and care that Doctor Lester said she needed. Here would have been the certainty of——

His getting off the street-car and turning into the yard of his own home were entirely mechanical. No conscious efforts attended his movements as he entered the door, and the Skipper's cheery greeting was left unuttered as the old man came quickly to his son.

"What is it, Raymond? What's wrong, sonny? Nothing the matter at the Plant, is there?"

Raymond MacDonald dropped heavily into a chair. His answer to the old man was to extend the paper to the Skipper who spread it out close to his eyes and stared at the black head-lines.

"What does it mean, Raymond?" The Skipper did not understand in what manner the scarehead bore upon his son.

"It means," young MacDonald's voice was hard and bitter, "it means that Avery has done his own niece out of ten thousand dollars, just as certain as though he had stolen it from her."

"Ten thousand dollars?" The Skipper gazed awe-struck at MacDonald. "Ten thousand dollars?" He whispered the words. "You mean Clara would have had ten thousand dollars if it wasn't for Avery?"

"No. Listen to me." Raymond drew the paper to him and threw it open on the table. "You see

this..." his finger descended on the middle line of the map of Averytown. "Well this, until yesterday, was Clara's."

"But—but she sold it to Mr. Lerner." Still the Skipper did not seem to comprehend.

"To Lerner. Bah! She sold it to Avery—Lucian Avery—that's what she did."

"And it is more valuable now?"

"Ten thousand dollars is not too high a price."

"But, sonny," the old man expostulated, "surely Avery didn't know all that, did he? Why, boy, there ain't no man who would do a thing like that to—to his own kin. And Avery knows how bad we needed it. He ain't that mean, sonny; you sure can't think——"

"I think," the younger man rose suddenly to his feet. "I think I'm going to see Mr. Lucian Avery, and when I do——" He left the sentence menacingly unfinished and turned to the door.

"But what're you goin' to do, sonny?" The Skipper felt a sudden, intuitive fear as he saw the grim face of his son.

"Never mind, dad; you just stay here with Clara. I'll attend to this." There was a hard threat in the boy's voice as the door closed upon him, and the Skipper's keen ears heard the hurried footsteps of his son on the walk that led to the street.

For perhaps a minute the old man stood motionless, staring at the paper on the table. Then he read

the story carefully, and, as he read the facts were made clear to him.

"He's goin' to see Avery," he whispered to himself. "And he's goin' to——"

The Skipper was suddenly moved to action. His voice quavered excitedly into the telephone as he sought connection with Avery's house in Ortega, and a long breath of actual, physical relief came over him as he heard the secretary's voice on the wire:

"Hello."

"Listen, Irma, listen." The Skipper didn't stop to choose words. "Will you come out here please—right away? As quickly as you can? I've got to go out—got to do something important—something very important right away. Please. I'll wait for you....Yes, I'll wait, but hurry. Hurry, won't you?"

He turned and began to pace the room. At the very best it would be an hour before the girl could reach the house, and the Skipper's mind conjured up wild pictures of what could transpire within that hour.

Mentally he followed the progress of Raymond MacDonald to the city, and he stopped his nervous pacing only long enough to listen intently at the foot of the stairs. No sound came from Clara MacDonald's room, for which he was thankful. If only

Irma came in time for him to stop the younger man before he reached Avery's house.

Wild schemes darted through the old man's head. He would get a launch at the docks and go by the river route. That would take him to Ortega faster than the street-cars. Then he remembered the long start his son would have had and he discarded this idea, casting about anxiously for one to take its place. He remembered an automobile salesman friend, but could not, for the life of him, recall the name of the company for which the man worked. He resumed his pacing of the room. Physical action was absolutely necessary. He felt that he could scarcely remain in the house another instant and turned with eager expectancy to the door as though expecting the girl to arrive at any moment.

But if the old man's anxious nervousness manifested itself thus physically, no less so did the ever-growing fury of the younger man on the south-bound street-car. It was necessary to transfer in the center of the city, and he descended from the car, his whole mind so intent on his destination that he paid no attention to the greetings of a surprised acquaintance who passed him as he stood impatiently on a corner.

The enforced wait was, perhaps, the best thing that could have happened, for he began, perforce, to think more clearly of his intended visit to the home of Lucian Avery in Ortega. And a moment's clear

thought showed plainly the ridiculous futility of the quest on which he had set out.

What could be gained by threatening Avery at this time? For that matter, he realized that he would cut rather a ridiculous figure in the eyes of any one who knew of his plans to force Avery to disgorge a larger price than that he had paid for the property of his wife.

It took not much thought for MacDonald to realize that, technically, Avery's action had been that only of a rather shrewd but honest speculator in land values. There was no questioning the legality of the purchase from a strictly objective business point of view. It was only when the personal element obtruded that the action became questionable, and then only as a matter of morals. If Avery chose to cheat, by means of a clever business deal, his only niece—to whom he had been all but a father—certainly it was the affair of only Lucian Avery himself, although a public account of the matter would undoubtedly earn for the promoter the opprobrium of the community.

As he waited new thoughts shaped themselves in the young man's mind, and when finally an Ortega car drew up on the corner, instead of boarding it, as he would have hurriedly done a few minutes earlier, MacDonald watched the car out of sight.

He turned slowly and began to walk quietly in the direction of the offices of the *Times-Union*. He had

begun to shape a new plan. He would give the entire facts of the matter to Coleman Ranson, and, if that young man could prevail on the editor to pass the story, MacDonald felt satisfied as to what the results would be. The *Times-Union*, he thought, might be glad to have this new angle to use as a follow-up to the *Metropolis* story, for MacDonald had no idea of how thoroughly Lucian Avery could and did squash stories and even press news-items inimical to his interests, not only in the papers of Jacksonville, but throughout the entire state.

And as he walked the plan grew clearer in his mind. If the *Times-Union* refused to print the facts, he resolved to disseminate them himself. The extravagance of this idea never once occurred to his mind. There was not a man in the state, he felt certain, who would not condemn, out of hand, the shameful actions of Avery, and, once a beginning was made, MacDonald had no doubt but that numerous instances would come to light of Avery's rapaciousness and greed. And when Avery had been stripped of the glamour that his tremendous success cast about him, Raymond MacDonald knew that it was only a matter of searching and there could be brought before the public the records of transactions which even he could only hint at, so monstrous were they in the very cleverness of their illegality.

He turned up the steps of the *Times-Union* Building just as a somewhat breathless and a very fright-

ened young lady ran up the narrow walk leading to MacDonald's house.

As she entered the door the Skipper drew her hurriedly into his own room, which also served as the general sitting-room for the family, and, carefully keeping alert for the least whisper from above stairs, hurriedly explained to the girl in vague, meaningless generalities that it was necessary for him to leave immediately.

He almost pushed her in the direction of the stairs, urging that she remain with his daughter-in-law and say nothing if the woman awakened asking for the Skipper or for her husband.

"Just say anything—anything at all, but don't let her suspect." The Skipper's voice and suppressed excitement were widely at variance with his usual cheerfulness.

"Suspect?" The word startled the girl. "Suspect what?"

"Oh, nothing—that is—no, nothing at all." The Skipper realized that he had not chosen his word happily. "Only don't say anything more about that land she sold Lerner—not a word—hear?"

The girl stopped short. "She *sold* it?"

"Yes, yes." The Skipper literally dragged her in the direction of the stairway. "She sold it before—before you told her not to."

At the bottom of the stairway the girl gently pushed the old man away from her:

"Look at me," she commanded imperiously; "look at me, I say." And the Skipper's eyes met hers reluctantly.

"Now what is it that you are going to do? Does Raymond know the news that was in the paper?" The girl's brown eyes steadily held the Skipper's blue wavering ones.

"You'll go right up? You won't try to stop me?" The old man countered anxiously.

"No, I won't stop you," the girl promised. "Tell me."

"Well, well, I'm going to find Raymond. He was awfully excited when he left, and—and I'm afraid he might do something awful—something desperate."

For a second the girl drew up startled, then, without another word, she slowly ascended the stairs.

CHAPTER XII

THE MAN AT THE TELEPHONE

IRMA WATKINS turned into the room at the head of the stairs, the room occupied by Clara MacDonald. Here she saw, thanks to the efficacy of the bromides prescribed by Doctor Edward Lester, that the invalid was sleeping quietly, so she tiptoed carefully from the room and once more descended the stairs.

She let herself quietly out on the veranda of the little house, and stood leaning against one of the porch supports staring out into the quiet deserted street.

A huge yellow moon hung suspended over the tops of the gently swaying trees, and a multitude of stars winked down from out the cloudless sky. The moon's rays filtered through the thick drooping branches of the weeping willows that lined the sidewalk and cast queer shadowy outlines on the street. The girl walked slowly as far as the gate, the moonlight beating down upon her and enveloping her in an airy, nebulous garment that gave her a fairy-like appearance as she leaned thoughtfully over the

closed gate, gazing wide-eyed at the shadows that fell about her.

The calm peacefulness of the night stole into her thoughts, soothing her gently and banishing the grotesque fears to which her sudden rapid journey to the MacDonald home had given rise.

After a short while she reentered the house and dropped into a chair by the table, both arms extended before her. In a measure she understood the reason of the Skipper's excitement. She knew that young MacDonald, once he had learned of the news of the sale of his wife's property to Harry Lerner, and had coupled it with her telephoned warning not to sell, would not long remain ignorant of the ultimate purchaser.

What she did not know was the manner in which the news had been received. It was, perhaps, to be expected that MacDonald would be angry, but that Avery's action would be the cause of a wild berserker fury, the girl could not have known.

Yet the Skipper's fear of the consequences of Raymond's departure from the house could not be explained by the naturally easily excited temperament of the old seaman, and, as she pondered, the girl realized that she should have made some effort to keep the older man in the house.

It was hard to tell what his fear for his son's safety might lead him into, and the girl, becoming frightened again at her own thoughts, pictured the

helpless old man wandering pitifully about the city seeking his boy.

It had been too late to stop the younger MacDonald, whom she had not seen, and, for an instant, the girl's mind jumped to the picture of Lucian Avery alone in his house.

She remembered suddenly that the housekeeper was out, and that the butler and chauffeur were, in all probability, in their own quarters some two hundred yards removed from the house. With her departure, the huge house was left with Lucian Avery as its only occupant.

She glanced at her wrist-watch. The time was eight forty-five. Avery nearly invariably retired to his room at nine. There he read or planned sketchily the work of the following day before turning off his lights. She knew his habit of reading in bed, and the thought of the possibilities of the situation brought her heart pounding into her throat.

Suppose Raymond MacDonald, angry and unthinkingly harsh in his fury, forced an entrance into the house? She dreaded to think what might be the outcome of an encounter between the two men. That Avery would concede anything to the younger was inconceivable. She could almost see the harsh face as he ordered MacDonald from the house. Perhaps he would even call for the police to arrest the intruder. She wondered if, by any chance, the old man would undertake the trip to Ortega in

search of his son, and half-hoped that he would. It would be the obvious place to seek him.

But she could do nothing to prevent what would transpire within the next few hours, and the thought of her helplessness was almost intolerable. Twice she started to the door, only to return irresolutely into the room. It was impossible to leave Clara MacDonald alone, and she had promised that she would not.

Then her mind leaped to Ranson. Perhaps that alert young man could do something. Or the doctor. The hospital was not far from Avery's residence. Hurriedly she called the hospital, only to find that Doctor Lester had but just left in answer to an urgent telephone call. The *Times-Union* line was busy, and the girl, whose face was drawn with tense lines of fear, turned away from the telephone.

The *Times-Union* line *was* busy; Central's modulated voice had given the correct information. The line was busy with a conversation, one side of which was carried on by Coleman Ranson, and, to judge from the expression that appeared on the young man's face, it was a conversation of considerable import.

"He's there now, you say?" Ranson questioned eagerly.

The query buzzed over the wire to the terminal of the connection: Roger's Drug Store in Springfield; and a bespectacled young clerk stuck his head

from behind the prescription counter to make certain before he answered:

"Yes, he's still here."

"You're sure it's the same man who phoned; the same man I was asking about?"

"Positive and certain." There was no hesitancy in the somewhat flippant reply. "This is the first time he's been here since; I've had my eyes peeled for him."

"What did he come in for?"

"Left a prescription," answered the clerk. "He's at the soda fountain now."

"Is he going to wait for the prescription?" The question shot into the transmitter and Ranson signaled frantically for the attention of Hugo Miller on the other side of the city room.

"He'll be back for it in a half-hour; I can keep him waitin' a little longer than that, but you'll have to hurry."

The game interested the prescription clerk. It was something out of the ordinary run of his existence to have become an important cog in a machine; an important one evidently, since it involved the fervid interest of the *Times-Union*, and, to the clerk, of those superhuman beings who actually wrote what went into the paper.

All that the clerk regretted was that some more official atmosphere had not been injected into the chase. The Detective Department had failed in his

estimation; failed most miserably; for, after the first questions that had been asked him several days previously no further word had come, although he had been keenly on the lookout for any suspicious man shadowing him to or from the store.

The detective who had questioned the clerk did not appeal to that young man's sense of fitness. Jackson was scarcely apt to leave behind him the impression of a transcendent detector of crime. He asked his questions flatly, received his answers and went away.

"You hold him as long as you can," Ranson pleaded over the wire. "There'll be somebody there in a few minutes. You'll recognize the man all right; he's the fellow that was there with me before; so hold him as long as you can."

The clerk agreed whisperingly that he would hold him if he had to make use of gags and ropes. And he turned carefully to make certain that the quarry had not disappeared during the conversation.

The man standing at the soda fountain, all unconscious of the amateur detective who watched him, received the change from his payment for his drink and turned to the door, stopping to light a cigar with the carelessness of any honest man.

That the man was engaged, even then, on some nefarious undertaking, the prescription clerk did not for a moment doubt, and when the suspect had stepped into the night the bespectacled clerk turned

to his pill tile, disappointed, somehow, that the man had not so much as thrown the customary suspicious glance over his shoulder.

Ranson turned from the telephone and shouted above the clatter of the city room.

"Come here a second, will you, Miller?"

"Well, what's up?" Hugo Miller leisurely drifted across the room to the reporter's desk.

"Plenty," Ranson gasped hurriedly. "Our phone guy is out in that drug store now. Beat it out there and get a look at him, and, for Pete's sake, don't lose him."

"How long will he be there?"

"He'll be back in half an hour," Ranson explained the situation hurriedly.

"You're not coming?" Miller was mildly surprised but prepared to leave immediately, however much he was certain that the man of the drug store was none other than Raymond MacDonald.

"Yes; I'll be there later," Ranson flung after the departing Miller. "If he comes back and leaves again before I get there, stick to him and phone the drug store when you can. I'll hang around there, but I've got to finish this infernal story first."

And as Miller left the office Ranson attacked his typewriter with new energy, hurriedly finishing up a rewrite of the *Metropolis* story of the new Avery undertaking.

But, even working at top speed, a good half-hour

elapsed before the final sheets of the story were run through his typewriter and he had carefully checked the statistics with which the story bristled. After that only a moment was wasted in diving down the stairs to the street, and, it was at the street entrance to the building that the reporter collided with Raymond MacDonald.

"Hello," Ranson greeted briefly. Then: "Come along if you want to talk—I'm in a fearful rush."

Not waiting for an answer he cranked his automobile, and Raymond MacDonald had no choice but to accompany the reporter he had come to see.

"I'll wait if you like," he began, his hand on the door of the car, "but I think I'd rather go along with you at that."

Even in his hurry, however, it was evident to the newspaper man that something of importance had brought MacDonald to the city and to the newspaper office at a time when he would ordinarily have been with his wife. Whatever the cause of MacDonald's coming to the city was, it no doubt also accounted for the hard set expression of the young man's face.

The pace set by the rattling car was dangerous in the down-town traffic, and, until safely through the center of the city, neither man spoke.

Finally the reporter jerked out a short: "Spill it, Mac, what's up your left sleeve?"

And only the rattling clank of the little car broke into the impassioned narration of MacDonald as he

outlined to the reporter the story of Lerner's purchase of the tract of land that made Averytown possible.

And Coleman Ranson, who had but just finished the long story for the morning edition of the paper caught immediately at the salient features. Even he, however, calloused to a large extent, was shocked by the meanness of Avery's action. For a moment he was incredulous.

"You don't really mean, Mac, that he actually pulled a deal like that on his own niece?"

Raymond nodded. "I *do* mean it, and—and—well you know what that money would mean to me."

"The dirty skunk!" The scorn in the reporter's ejaculation was withering. For an instant he even forgot the mission on which he was rushing so recklessly.

After a moment's reflection, however, he shook his head.

"I don't think the paper would handle it," he admitted aloud. "Avery could squash it, and he'll be looking for you to do just something like this."

MacDonald's face was outlined sharply as the car passed beneath a sputtering arc light. "You've got to do it, Ranson; you've got to."

Ranson jerked his head impatiently. "Good lord, Mac, I'd do it in a minute," he growled assuringly. "And I'm not so darned certain that the old man

wouldn't," he finished. "But there'd be hell to pay when it did come out."

He skidded sharply around a corner and brought the car to a sudden standstill before the drug store.

"Just a minute," he flung at MacDonald and jumped to the curb. For a second he glanced around, but Hugo Miller was nowhere in sight, and he hurried into the store. The clerk, who had evidently been on the lookout for his arrival, came forward immediately.

"Right after I phoned you," the clerk greeted, "the fellow left. He came back and I managed to hold him until your friend got here. They just left a minute ago."

"Left together?" Ranson voiced his astonishment.

"Naw. Of course they wasn't together." The clerk's tone was mildly patronizing. "Your friend was following him."

"Thanks," Ranson started for the door uncertainly, but brought up at the clerk's hurried announcement.

"Say, that ain't all."

"What else?" Ranson retraced his steps. There was less eagerness in his question, however, for in the back of his mind he was busy with the problem presented by MacDonald's story, and the probabilities of his being able to prevail on the city editor to try to get the story passed through.

"He used the phone again right before he left." The clerk plainly thought this startling information.

"Which man?" Ranson's query was mechanical.

"Aw, the guy you're after, of course." The clerk was displeased with Ranson's lack of acumen. Nor was he any more pleased with the indifferent manner in which this last bit of important information had been received.

"Say," he blurted, "don't you want to know who the guy telephoned to?"

Ranson brought his thoughts back sharply to the immediate present. "Did you find out?"

"I'll say I did." The prescription clerk was plainly pleased with himself. "He called for the *Times-Union* and he asked for Mr. Coleman Ranson."

This information had the desired startling effect. "Did he talk with anybody else?" Ranson half-turned to the telephone booth, but the clerk's next words stopped him.

"Nope. I asked the girl at the *T-U* board and she says that the guy hung up when she said Mr. Ranson wasn't there."

"Good enough." Ranson hurried to the doorway and passed out into the street where Raymond MacDonald was impatiently awaiting him.

MacDonald's mind was in no state to appreciate the business that might have brought Coleman Ranson to Springfield. He only knew that it was

necessary to impress on the reporter the urgency and justice of his own case. And he began immediately :

"I think, Ranson, that if we——"

The advent of the breathless feature writer broke off the suggestion.

Miller only gave the briefest of nods in MacDonald's direction, although he was surprised to see that young man in the company of Ranson.

"Come on," he cried eagerly. "He's up at that little restaurant on the corner there."

And the two men dashed immediately toward the indicated cross-street, leaving MacDonald thoroughly uncomprehending and nervously awaiting their return. Ranson passed slowly by the door of the restaurant pointed out by Miller, and almost immediately returned to the feature man.

"That man in brown?" he questioned with large incredulity in his face.

"That's him." Miller nodded.

"Sure? Sure there's no chance for a mistake?" Ranson's face now expressed the utmost amazement.

"Positively none; that's the guy."

"And you don't know who that is?" Ranson was surprised at Miller's calm manner and the negative shake of the head that answered his question.

"Good grief, man!" The young reporter's exclamation sounded hopelessly inadequate. "Why, man, that's Harry Lerner! He's Avery's right-hand man!"

He did not wait to hear Hugo Miller's expression

of startled surprise. That young man's carefully reared house of deduction was tumbling about him.

Ranson entered the restaurant unhesitatingly and approached the man at a small table to one side.

The greetings between them were brief; then Ranson inquired casually:

"Mind coming up to the office with me a minute? I've got a car up the street."

Lerner smiled pleasantly. Evidently the *Times-Union* was in need of some particular information that he could furnish. It pleased him that they should think him high in the councils of Lucian Avery's assistants, and of sufficient importance that a reporter of such prominence as Coleman Ranson should be sent for him. He rose obligingly.

"Not at all; glad to be of assistance," he assured, and turned with Ranson to the door.

Here his eyes fell on the waiting Miller, and a flush of suspicion leaped into his eyes as Ranson made the necessary introductions.

At that moment it occurred to Lerner to wonder how Ranson of the *Times-Union* happened to know of his whereabouts at that particular time, since his dropping into the small restaurant had been entirely unpremeditated.

And when the now silent Ranson led the way to his automobile in front of which MacDonald was pacing restlessly, the lawyer made as though to withdraw.

"I'll drop in on you—er—to-morrow, Mr. Ranson." Lerner made no effort to conceal the fact that his sudden change of decision to accompany the reporter was due to the presence of Raymond MacDonald.

"Don't you think it would be more advisable to go now—unattended?" The unmistakable menace in the reporter's seemingly innocuous suggestion halted Lerner for a brief instant.

Then his mind leaped to the conclusion that seemed to him inevitable. . . . Ranson had learned of the story of the land deal; Raymond MacDonald had doubtless gone straight to the *Times-Union*, and the paper had sent for him in order to get his statement and corroboration of the facts.

The conclusion satisfied the lawyer. He forgot that it did not account for the fact that Ranson had known where he was to be found, and a slight smile played about his mouth as he thought of Lucian Avery, and how utterly any proposed story of the *Times-Union's* would be nipped on the press by the command of the promoter.

So, with a slight shrug and the barest of nods in recognition of MacDonald, he stepped into the waiting car, followed by Miller.

MacDonald, however, was far too entirely engrossed with the sudden confusion of his own thoughts so much as to reply to the lawyer's cold greeting. What had Ranson to do with Lerner?

Why his haste and evident anxiety not to lose sight of the man? There was more, as MacDonald readily saw, than appeared on the surface. Or had Ranson sought out the lawyer in order to secure corroboration of the story that he had told the reporter? The last question was dropped almost immediately. Ranson was en route to the drug store before he had learned of the reason for MacDonald's night visit.

But the time that was being consumed in these endless speculations and these inexplicable actions of Ranson only intensified his nervous excitement, and the jerky twitch about his lips testified to the tension under which he was laboring as the car started again toward the city.

After a few minutes, unable longer to control himself, MacDonald leaned over to speak to Ranson. The young reporter, however, cut short the intention by growling in a half-whisper.

"Not now; wait until we get to the office."

And MacDonald was forced to obey the admonition, albeit his face expressed plainly the chaotic state of his feelings.

The car drew into Forsythe Street, rolled rapidly past the Post-Office Building, and, finally, came to a halt before the offices of the *Times-Union*. Ranson was the first man from the car; consequently he was the first to notice the excitement about the building of the newspaper. A man dashed from the

lighted building; leaped on a waiting motorcycle, and, with a roar and grinding of gears, swept into the night.

From the distance—from the direction of Bay Street—came the sudden shriek of a siren splitting the night and recognized immediately as that of the fire chief's car. Then followed a harsh clangor of the bells of the automobile fire fighting apparatus of the down-town station.

Ranson yelled a query at a boy who dashed from the building. The boy stopped short, then, recognizing Ranson, came bounding in his direction.

"City editor says get out to Ortega quick! Just got th' alarm. There's a house burnin' out there hell bent for election, and it's Lucian Avery's!"

A sharp cry broke from MacDonald as he heard the message, and a guttural exclamation of astonishment from Lerner in the back seat. Miller sat apparently struck dumb by this newest development. Only the young reporter remained cool. He quickly cranked the car and leaped into his seat. In a moment the small car slewed into Bay Street, narrowly escaping destruction against the curb; then straightened and leaped ahead. But the reporter had time for a glance at the face of the man beside him: a face pale and strangely set, with eyes gleaming in a manner that sent a premonitory thrill through the reporter. Raymond MacDonald was on the verge of physical collapse.

CHAPTER XIII

FIRE

CAREENING through the night, the huge clanging fire engines reeled down the wide boulevard, their brazen throated gongs echoing and re-echoing through the suddenly shattered peace and quiet that had marked the suburb of Ortega.

From the river came the piercing screams of the sirens of the fire launches, while lights sprung to sudden life in the darkened houses and frightened, night-clad residents, awakened from sleep, stared amazedly into the night, peering into the outer darkness in search for the explanation of the bedlam.

High in the heavens, scudding cloud-banks hid for a time the light of the moon: the starlight lending a weirdly grotesque illumination to the scene. Questions were shouted to men who dashed, half-clad, past the houses: frightened questions that received no answers. Far in the distance, a sullen black pall seemed to hang suspended in mid-air.

"Fire! Fire!"

That most fearful of all cries in the night echoed down the street, and the gasped word flew from mouth to mouth:

"Fire!"

And then, as though a heavy curtain had arisen, the moon leaped from behind the shadowing clouds, throwing into sudden relief the bedlam scene. The clattering engines forced their way, with difficulty, through the shouting throng, and the cries of the newly arrived policemen in their effort to establish the fire-lines were drowned in the general pandemonium.

The magnificent structure that was the home of Lucian Avery was doomed to utter ruin. Even the least experienced of the morbidly excited onlookers knew the fact, yet the firemen fought valiantly to subdue the inferno.

That the fire had been raging for some time prior to the arrival of the engines was immediately evident, and by the time Ranson's car plowed recklessly through the crowd and brought up against a bulging fire hose, the fire chief realized that little could be done.

Ranson leaped from the car, followed immediately by Raymond MacDonald. On the opposite side of the car descended Lerner and Miller, and, with the briefest of nods, Ranson indicated to Miller that he was to watch Lerner's movements, while the reporter himself threw his weight immediately into the ever-thickening mass that crowded the police dead-line.

A sudden thought had gripped Ranson. Did Lerner know anything about the catastrophe? The

idea was a wild one, but it would not down as the reporter fought with knees and elbows to push through the tightly jammed crowd.

The throng packed the yard before the house, and overran the tremendous lawn to the east and west. In the rear of the house the famous Avery gardens disappeared as though by the touch of a maleficent sprite under the heedless feet of the multitude, and the carefully tended gravel walks that extended to the river became in a few moments as one with the trampled grass and flower beds of the gardens.

Coils of squirming fire-hose crossed and recrossed beneath the feet of the watchers. The efforts made by the handful of police were futile to prevent the encroachments of the gazers, and frantic messages were shouted for assistance.

For several minutes MacDonald stood irresolutely by the car, then he followed in the footsteps of Ranson and pushed his way to the front of the crowd. People of the immediate neighborhood, recognizing the pale set face and the gleaming eyes of the young man, made way before him; a few well-meaning ones crying out unheard encouragements.

The opening for a moment afforded by the passing of Raymond MacDonald was too much for the feature-writing-minded Miller, and, with a call to Lerner to follow, he leaped into the lane made for

MacDonald. Breathlessly the three men emerged at the stout rope stretched by the harried policemen, and ducked under it as a uniformed arm was lowered in recognition of the lawyer.

The voice of an assistant fire chief hailed MacDonald as he emerged, and automatically the young man turned in the direction of the man who had called and followed the waving hand of the uniformed man as he ran toward the eastern side of the house. From the expression on Raymond MacDonald's face it was not difficult to guess that his emotions were in a turmoil, and it was easy to see that the firemen who passed him thought highly of the man and shouted encouragement to him.

"Have her down in a minute, Mac! Guess the old bird won't burn out altogether! Cheer-o, buddy; *you* don't have to pay for it!"

Patently it was the western wing of the house that was in the greatest immediate danger; this being the wing in which Lucian Avery lived, and, at the time, the only really occupied portion of the house save for the library and the study below.

Huge clouds of black smoke rolled heavily from the windows broken by the high-pressured streams of water, and now and again a leaping, jagged flame cut through the smoke screen and illuminated redly the upturned faces of the watching crowd.

Miller stood gaping at the structure that was soon

to crumble beneath the onset of the fire, and Lerner, beside him, was breathing hard and rapidly.

"Stand back there! Get back, dammit!" The sorely harassed policemen bellowed their commands to the ever nearer-edging crowd. "She's goin' to cave in a minute—get away from there! Oh, damn! Ain't you got no brains? Back there—get back!"

Harry Lerner, breathing fast, stood gazing at the efforts of the policemen. In the lawyer's mind a sudden plan had sprung full blown. The lower part of the house, despite the policeman's earnest adjurations, seemed, at the moment, reasonably safe. He calculated the distance with his eyes. It would be the work of but a moment to get through the hall and into the library where Avery's business papers were kept. One of these papers was of particular interest to Mr. Harry Lerner. It was hopeless to expect that the fire would destroy the vault set in the library vault, or damage its contents. Lerner knew that particular vault too well. It was not impossible, however, that the vault was open. It frequently was while Avery was at work in the house.

The thought of encountering Lucian Avery in the library frightened him for a moment. What would happen if, when he dashed into the house, he found himself face to face with the promoter in the library? If Avery was in the house, he would doubtless be, even then, gathering together his papers for safety. Lucian Avery was not the man to be startled out

of his wits by a fire. He would take it calmly and collectedly, saving what he could, and, at the last moment, making a safe exit.

But Lerner resolved to chance it. If Avery was in the house and he encountered him; then, so much the worse for Lucian Avery. The lawyer's face was not a pleasant study. His eyes shot rapid glances about him. No one, save Miller, was near enough to stop him once he had started.

A roar of astonishment went up as the man was seen to dash forward and into the open front door of the house.

MacDonald, near the eastern corner of the house, turned at the sound but saw nothing save the pressing, shrieking crowd. Then the pointing finger of the young fire chief indicated the running figure, and MacDonald's eyes bulged as they followed the form until it disappeared in the smoke.

The fire chief turned to MacDonald, watching that young man closely.

"Wonder where Avery is?" He speculated suddenly.

"Avery?" MacDonald's voice was hoarse and strained. "I—I wonder."

No one, it appeared, had thought of the man. It seemed to have been assumed that Lucian Avery had come from the house; come out, perhaps, before even the arrival of the first of the spectators. But with the lawyer's wild dash into the house, sudden

questions leaped into the minds of the onlookers. And when, a very few minutes later, the man staggered from the door, half-choked and entirely blinded by the smoke and gas, but empty-handed, a startling rumor ran through the bystanders.

"Avery is in the house! Lucian Avery is in the west wing!"

It could not have been told where the suggestion started. It seemed to leap to simultaneous life in a dozen places, for soon the frightened lips of people on all sides of the house repeated the astoundingly horrible words:

"Lucian Avery is in the west wing!"

From that, the hysteria of the moment engendered strange hallucinations. A dozen declared that Lucian Avery had been seen coming from the house; these were cried down by fervid denials from others; one man vowed that he had seen the figure of Lucian Avery in an upper window. This was, patently, untrue, for the ever-thickening smoke screen did not permit vision of the upper windows.

Miller, who was dragging the half unconscious Lerner back beyond the crowds near the fire-lines, suddenly blurted:

"Did you see him inside? Did you go in to get him? Couldn't you find him?"

A weak shake of the head was the only answer he received from the limp burden that was Harry.

Lerner, and he hurried the man beyond the range of hundreds of gapingly staring eyes.

Coleman Ranson had noted the lawyer's entrance into the house and had impulsively started to follow, when he was caught in a hard grip, and a harsh voice bellowed :

"Is ut killin' yerself ye are after bein'?"

And the fireman kept a tight hold on the struggling reporter until Lerner was again seen to stagger through the doorway. Ranson had seen Miller among the men who had run immediately to the lawyer's aid, and the heavy grip of the fireman released him.

"An' it's your life I was after savin' then, Mister Ranson."

Ranson shrugged and the Irishman laughed heartily as he turned his attention to a twisting hose that was shoved between his legs.

From behind the men came the grinding shriek of brakes that heralded the arrival of another contingent of the fire-fighters, and, in a moment, two-score additional oilskin-coated firemen had pushed their way to the front.

The assistant fire chief, who was engaged on the work at the eastern end of the house, signaled a subordinate to take charge, and, motioning to MacDonald to follow him, struggled through the press until they came out near the river. Here the two men boarded one of the fire launches and the fire-

man led the way into a small cabin forward. In a few moments steaming cups of coffee and succulent sandwiches were brought them by an ebony cook, who chuckled mightily as he related the story of the trip up the river:

"If this heah ain't the runin'est boat, I don't want nothin'. Boss-man, we ain't started from the Laura Street dock befo' we wuz right heah. Jes' nachelly made it in nuthin', no time a-tall."

The fire chief motioned to MacDonald to help himself, but that young man was in no humor for refreshment. He paced up and down the tiny cabin nervously.

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Hardly, Mac. We can't very well run hose from the launch, you know. Too far away for one thing and we haven't the pressure for another. Sit down, man. Everything's being done that can be done, and worrying don't help it any." The fire chief reached for the coffee.

"I'd think, Mac," he began slowly, "I'd think that you'd not be any too peeved to see—well, the whole blooming shebang go up."

MacDonald turned hotly to the fireman. "God knows I don't love Lucian Avery any,—" he began, and, as the recollection of all the name of Lucian Avery meant to him: "I hope to heaven he's right in the middle of it. By God! I hope so."

The fireman laughed. "Steady, old boy; there's

no reason to get so all-fired stagey about it. Besides, I heard as we came down that he probably is."

"That Avery is in the house? You heard that? Who said it?" MacDonald's pale face had a sudden frightened look.

The fireman shrugged. "Of course it's bull," he remarked, finishing his coffee and setting down the cup. "The old guy probably got out in plenty of time—more's the pity. I don't know as there would be any great weeping and wailing if he turned up missing."

He rose and led the way to the deck; thence to the pier and again toward the house. A dull roar came to their ears, and their pace increased until their progress was again blocked by the jammed mass of humanity that stared pop-eyed toward the burning dwelling.

A sudden commotion arose on the western side of the house. It began far on the outskirts of the throng and seemed gradually to work toward the crowd's center. The cause of the commotion was a dishevelled, gray-haired little old man who dashed wildly into the mob, his voice quavering excitedly on a dozen questions.

People endeavored, vainly, to stop his progress and to pacify him, but he struggled wildly forward, intent on reaching a certain point.

His objective, it appeared, was the crimson car of the Police Department, and, when he reached this, he

clamored eagerly for the attention of Inspector Herndon who sat stolidly at the driver's seat, his mouth half open, staring fascinatedly at the flaming house.

"What's that?" The inspector heard his name shrieked in a high voice.

"Here I am, Herndon. It's me. It's the Skipper."

The inspector peered into the crowd beyond the lines and beheld the figure of the old man. He came heavily from his car and, with a rough arm, shoved aside those who would have blocked the old man's further progress.

Old man MacDonald panted gratefully into the open space before him.

"Where's Avery?" he choked pantingly.
"Where's Lucian Avery?"

"Huh!" The inspector piloted the man to the crimson automobile. "Don't know where he is, and"—the inspector's voice was not exactly complimentary—"and I don't give a happy damn!"

"They say he's in the house. Is he in the house? Tell me, Herndon, is he in there?" The old man clutched the inspector's sleeve.

The inspector again crawled into his seat from which a clear view of the activities could be obtained.

"If he is," he replied, "he's roast meat now." Then he turned to the old man and, leaning over,

slapped him heavily on the shoulder. "Come up and see the fire-works. What're you worried about Avery for? The devil'll take care of his own right enough."

But the little blue eyes gleamed wildly at a new thought.

"Ha' you seen my boy? Has Raymond been here? Do you hear me, Herndon? Has he been here?"

"Take it easy, Skipper; take it easy;" the inspector's heavy hand fell from the man's shoulder. "The boy's probably at home, where you ought to be. He hasn't been around here since I've got on the job and I arrived right at the beginnin'."

The inspector's answer seemed to open up a new line of thought to the official, for he suddenly became engrossed in his own speculations and the eyes that he now turned to the burning house held a speculative gleam that had not been there before the advent of the old sailor.

The long-drawn shriek that suddenly rose behind him drew him about. Then his eyes leaped again in the direction of the house, and he saw the old man as he ran toward the west entrance.

"Don't do it! Stop him, somebody! For God's sake stop him!"

The screams were terrifying, but unavailing, for the little Skipper was suddenly lost to sight in the

maelstrom of flame that leaped about the veranda that bordered the western side of the house.

Coleman Ranson fought his way to the inspector's car.

"What was it?" he breathed heavily. "What was the yelling about? Something happen?"

The inspector stared with wide eyes at the half hidden door through which the old man had vanished, and made no answer.

But answers to the reporter's question came from a dozen hysterical points. For a minute Ranson was staggered at the colossal nerve of the man; then as the full realization of what the old Skipper's heroism really meant struck him, he gasped.

The father of Raymond MacDonald undertaking, at the risk of his own life, to save the enemy of his son! The thought was breath-taking, and, for once, Coleman Ranson was absolutely at loss. He could not even think what it meant.

The menacing flames that licked the wooden supports of the veranda danced mockingly before the doorway through which the Skipper had dashed, and Ranson suddenly remembered having brought the younger MacDonald to the scene of the fire. Did Raymond know of his father's presence? How had the old man got to Ortega? Why? These questions leaped, lightning-like, across the reporter's mind, and without a word he turned from the inspector and again threw himself into the crowd in

an effort to work his way to the point where he had last seen MacDonald in conversation with the fire chief.

A sudden booming crash came from the house. Some portion of the interior had finally caved under the strain, and a long thin sheet of flame leaped triumphantly through the roof.

Then came that indescribable sound of a thousand voices raised suddenly in one shout.

"There he is! Here he comes! Help him, somebody! For Christ's sake, make room ahead there! Let me through if you're scared! Hurrah!"

Through the flaming frame of the doorway lurched the Skipper. He half dragged, half carried a burden that, ordinarily, would have been thrice impossible for him to move. Across the very threshold he stumbled and fell—recovered weakly—staggered a pace and crashed to the ground as the wooden rails of the veranda falling outward, showered their sparks on the prone body.

There was no holding the crowd. Policemen strove vainly against the rush and went forward with the irresistible press. For a moment it seemed as though the very crumbling house itself would be overrun.

And a hundred eager hands dragged the two forms far beyond immediate danger.

The Skipper weakly pushed aside the hands that supported him and swayed giddily on his feet. The

gray hair was singed close to the head, and red livid streaks traversed the wrinkled face of the man. His eyes were shut and he groped helplessly:

"Did I—did I—did he——"

He fell forward, open mouthed, against the big hulk of Inspector Herndon as a dozen hysterically broken voices screamed the assuring answer to his broken question.

"You got him out! You bet you did!"

The inspector supported the figure of the Skipper until relieved by a fireman; then he gazed in astonishment at his own wet hands. An ominous red stain spread slowly over the rough palms.

He turned from the Skipper to the form of Avery about which pressed the crowd. With a roar he pushed into them and dropped on his knees beside the man. Then his voice rose in a thunderous, panic-inspiring shout:

"Get a doctor! An ambulance here, somebody! Move fast!" The voice of the inspector suddenly broke off and the crowd drew back as he stared fascinatedly at a spot on the white coat of Avery's pajamas. The spot-light from the crimson auto brought into sharp relief the gray face of the promoter and the tell-tale scarlet stain.

With stumbling fingers the inspector unbuttoned the jacket, but he did not need the evidence of his eyes to tell him the truth:

Lucian Avery had been shot!

CHAPTER XIV

HARRY LERNER

THE Harris Hospital of Ortega, a low, rambling, white structure, with wide glass-enclosed porches gleamed in the bright moonlight and cast a heavy restful shadow far across the broad green lawn.

The hospital contrasted strangely the clear white and the severe architecture of its structure against the more decorative and lavish construction of the dwellings which surrounded it; and its lighted windows winked into the still night beckoningly.

Beneath a desk lamp on the ground floor of the hospital, before a desk littered with an accumulation of medical journals, instruments, books and periodicals a clumsy figure sat reading. Doctor Edward Lester—chief physician—was painstakingly tracing the history of the dread autumnal malaria, forgetful of time, forgetful of his surroundings and, most marvelous of all, forgetting even to smoke his everlasting cigarettes.

A young interne burst suddenly into the office, and the big doctor raised his head heavily from his

book, one finger descending on the page before him to mark his place.

"Well?" The doctor's eyes blinked as he tried to accustom them to the gloom of the office outside the circle of the light that came from the desk lamp.

The excitement of the young interne caused his words to tumble over one another.

"Lucian Avery's been shot. His house is burning down. I've had him sent to the operating-room and——"

The doctor's book crashed unheeded to the floor as the big man came to his feet.

"What's that? Avery's been sent to the operating-room?"

The young interne nodded. "Yes, sir; there's a big fire at his house. The ambulance driver says that the house is nearly destroyed and——"

The doctor did not hear the end of the sentence, and, before the interne had time to collect his thoughts, the big man was punching excitedly at the small button that summoned the elevator leading to the operating-room. The elevator was, for Doctor Lester, an almost essential institution, for the operating-room, located under the specially constructed glass roof was five stories from the ground, and, as the doctor not infrequently said, the climbing of five flights of stairs would leave him a nervous wreck, if indeed, it was not the sudden and entire end of him.

Within a surprisingly short time, however, his huge bulk encased in a white operating gown, a small white cap fitted close over his head and his huge hands submerged in a formaldehyde solution, the doctor was barking hurried commands to an attending nurse as he clumsily drew on the wet rubber gloves.

Beneath the blaze of ten huge electric bulb clusters stood the narrow operating table; at its head an alert anesthetician stood ready for emergencies and an unflustered, trim nurse wheeled forward the steaming sterilizer containing the nicked instruments.

The doctor had been metamorphosed into a great automaton. Gone was his languid air and slow deliberate movement. With the all-enveloping gown covering his baggy, stained street clothes he looked the part of the keen, highly trained surgeon that he was as he stooped professionally over the table. No atom of a personal consideration was in the glance that darted from the little eyes into the face of Lucian Avery. The little shrewd eyes seemed to narrow suddenly behind their puffed lids. He picked up one of the patient's hands and his sensitive fingers sought for the pulse. Only a moment sufficed to give him the information he desired, and he stooped again calmly to turn back one slightly quivering eyelid of the patient. Then he dropped his hands to his sides and turned to the nurse.

"Take him to room twelve," he grunted heavily. "There's nothing I can do here."

And, as the big man turned from the table, thoughtfully stripping off his gloves, which he dropped again into their antiseptic solution, the nurse nodded professionally to the anesthetist:

"No, nor any one else, either."

Five minutes later the doctor, clad again in the shapeless clothes that he wore, leaned once more over the form of Lucian Avery, though this time in a small white room of one of the wards.

He turned with a brief order to the nurse who had been in attendance, and the woman left the room.

The doctor stared thoughtfully for a moment at the bed. It seemed that the man was already dead, but the big physician set methodically about the task of filling a small hypodermic syringe with a colorless liquid that he drew into the glass barrel from a tiny phial.

No visible physical reaction followed the jab of the needle, yet, in a moment the effect of the powerful stimulant was evidenced.

The hard eyes of the man on the bed fluttered open. They gazed straight up, wide, set and expressionless; then they drifted, as though involuntarily, to the form of the doctor and rested on him blankly. Finally a look of recognition filled them and the man's lips parted as though he were about to speak.

The doctor, clearly surprised at the manifestation of vitality, leaned far over. There was nothing further that he could do; no course remained to him but that of waiting, and the doctor knew that his wait was not to be a long one. Lucian Avery had schemed his last scheme; no more would the maledictions of the unfortunate losers by his manipulations ring out hopelessly against the grim sarcastic utterances of the promoter as he sat in his swivel chair, sneering openly at the threats of those less fortunate than he.

And as the big physician gazed unseeingly into the eyes of Avery, a subtle cruel expression filled them, and the lips twisted into a whispered sound.

The first words were a meaningless mumble; then: "....Watkins Miss Watkins she tell... she"

The doctor raised his gaunt face from the bedside. Lucian Avery was dead.

For a long time the hulking man gaped at the form on the bed, the meaningless words pounding in his brain.

Irma Watkins! The doctor's breathing grew rapid as he took in the full meaning and potentialities of the words. What had she done that this man should mention her in his last breath?

The doctor's little eyes darted furtively about the room as though fearful that some one else had heard the hoarse whisper. A great growing fear began

to possess the man, and his steps were unsteady as he left the room and turned into the hall. Sudden lines appeared in his heavy cheeks and beneath his eyes. What was it that Irma Watkins could tell? It was hard to think of her in connection with the man who lay in the room. The doctor's tongue touched his dry lips, and he formed the words soundlessly: "Irma Watkins."

Then he remembered the interne's words about a fire. He stood stupidly in the hallway before his brain reacted to the new stimulus. Fire? The big man suddenly remembered. There was a fire at Avery's—at the dead man's house.

He lumbered heavily into his office and out of the private entrance to the hospital, and puffed laboriously up the street.

The calm peaceful clearness of the night; the soft whisper of the wind in the sycamores, and the damp pleasant aromatic tang in the air had their effect, and the big man moved with more deliberation. There was no occasion for haste, and there was much to think over.

When he reached the corner of the boulevard, several blocks from the hospital, he saw far ahead of him a dull red glow that lighted the skies, and it seemed that he could faintly hear the raucous voices of the firemen as they strove against the flames.

A passing auto slewed to a halt before the doctor who stood fairly in the road. The huge medico

moved absently aside, then recognized the voice of the profane driver. Soon he was seated in the car, speeding south on the boulevard in the direction of Avery's house.

The mob before the burning structure had not lessened. If anything, the press was even greater, all waiting expectantly for the final crumbling of the massive house. And it was not long in coming.

"Stand back there! Back away, everybody!" The fire chief's voice rang out above the tumult. "You Riddell—Plotkin—Maybeck!" He shouted the names of the firemen nearest the building. "Way enough, there! Let it go!" And the firemen, staggering with the burden of their bulging fire hose withdrew slowly from the house.

A geyser of flame spouted high through the center of what had been the Avery homestead. A rumbling warning thunder broke, followed by a sharp hissing mass of flame. A slow hesitant movement could be seen; then the huge mass crumpled heavily together. Came a swishing crash, and sparks and flying bits of wood cascading into the crowd. It was the end.

The doctor elbowed his way to where he could make out the figure of Detective Jackson. Jackson was standing at a point of vantage, both hands crammed into his trousers pockets, a cigarette hanging unlighted from his mouth, and gazing at the ruins with a look of mild, half-aroused interest.

"Have you seen Miss Watkins?" The doctor's voice rumbled heavily, and Jackson, brought suddenly away from his amusement—the enjoying of the pyrotechnic display—gazed stolidly at the doctor a moment.

"Oh, the secretary you mean? Naw, I ain't seen her. Don't think she's been around." He turned his eyes to the burning mass before him. "Least-wise," he concluded consolingly, "if she was in the house, there ain't much chance that she'd be——"

But the doctor was no longer listening. He had made out the crimson car of the Department and the figure of Inspector Herndon.

As soon as the inspector sighted the big man pushing toward him, he came forward hurriedly.

"How's Avery?"

The doctor, however, asked his own question: "Seen Miss Watkins around?"

A surprised look came into the inspector's face. Then the heavy assurance. "She hasn't been around, Doc. I was here from the beginnin'. Talked to the housekeeper a minute ago and she said she hadn't seen her either, so it's all right, I guess."

The doctor's features lightened somewhat, and the inspector hurried to repeat his first question.

"How's Avery?"

"Dead." The one word constituted the doctor's answer.

The inspector looked about him a second. "Was it murder?" he questioned.

The doctor nodded heavily. "Nothing else; couldn't 'a' been anything else."

"Did he get to you in time?"

"In time for what?"

"Were you able to do anything for him?" The inspector explained.

"Nothing but give him a shot of dope." The doctor's answers were not elaborate.

"Was he conscious?" Inspector Herndon was not passing up such an excellent opportunity to ask for himself the questions to which, in his official capacity, he would have to seek answers later.

"Only for a moment; just a moment." The doctor seemed to be thinking deeply for he answered absently.

"Say anything?"

"What?"

"Did he say anything?" The inspector repeated the question; then enlarged: "While he was conscious, I mean, did he make any statement?"

The doctor's head had begun to shake thoughtfully at the beginning of the question and the inspector did not await verbal confirmation of the negative sign.

"There's no doubt but that the shot killed him, is there? Did he have any other injuries?"

"He had a broken shoulder," the doctor grum-

bled. "A beam fell on him, I suppose. But it had nothing to do with his death. The bullet did that."

"Did you get the bullet?" The inspector was passing up no chances.

And again the big physician shook his head. "I saw it was useless to try to operate," he explained. "The autopsy no doubt will recover——"

Coleman Ranson had drawn near the two men unobserved, and now pushed between them.

"What's that?" he asked eagerly. "Heard that Avery'd been shot. Fact? Is he dead?"

The inspector frowned his annoyance. "Yes, he's dead;" he growled.

"Say, Doc; where's the body?"

"Aw go on, you ghoul." Again the inspector horned in. "You'll see it soon enough. The autopsy'll be held to-morrow. Why bother the man about it now?" He seemed suddenly very solicitous for the doctor.

"You haven't seen Miss Watkins, have you?" The doctor addressed his question to the reporter, and Ranson shook his head.

"I was busy with the Skipper," he volunteered. "They took him to the Ortega Hospital, although I wanted him sent to you."

"The Skipper? Old man MacDonald? What's he got to do with this?" This new angle disconcerted the doctor.

"What? Don't you know?" Ranson had not actually witnessed the Skipper's action, but he had heard the story from a dozen eye-witnesses and the Skipper's heroism lost nothing in the reporter's telling of it.

"Is the old man all right?" The doctor's question interrupted the adjectival flow of the reporter's praise.

"Yep. Hospital sent him home in an ambulance. Face burned some, and hands. That's about all. He'll be O. K. in a few days."

The doctor nodded his relief and turned again to the inspector, but Ranson was insistent:

"What about Avery, Doc? Was he murdered? How?"

The doctor nodded. "He was shot—shot in the chest. A revolver did it, I think. He died at the hospital; I didn't have time to operate."

And Coleman Ranson suddenly remembered. Without another word he streaked it through the crowd, and dashed wildly about the outskirts of the thinning throng. Eventually he found the man he sought.

"Where's Lerner?" he questioned.

"I sent him home in a car," Hugo Miller advised. "Say, do you know he lives in Springfield too?"

The fact did not seem to interest Ranson. "How bad was he hurt?"

"Not much," Miller replied. "Gassed a little, I

think, that's about all. Probably be all right to-morrow."

Ranson suddenly dragged the surprised feature writer in the direction of his automobile.

"Yes, and he'll probably be a thousand miles away, too." Ranson snapped the words.

"What?" Miller was startled. "What's the big idea?"

"You saw him rush into the house, didn't you?" challenged the young reporter. "What'd he bring out?"

"Nothing." Miller was positive. "I asked him if he'd seen Avery, and if he went in there to see if he could save the——"

"What'd he say?" The interjection came from Ranson as he stooped to crank his car.

"He said he hadn't seen him. He seemed pretty badly knocked out so I didn't bother him much, but he did say he hadn't seen Avery. Why?"

"That's what *he* says, eh?"

Miller nodded. "Yes. What's the idea of the questions?"

"This;" Ranson shot back quickly. "About ten minutes after Harry Lerner came out of that house the Skipper went in, and ——"

Ranson stopped as Miller's eyes grew large in surprise and expectancy:

"——and when the Skipper hauled Lucian Avery out of that house, Avery'd been shot!"

"The hell he had!" Miller's surprise was evidenced by his inelegant phrasing. "How d'you know?"

"Because Avery died at the Harris Hospital fifteen minutes ago," blurted the reporter. "Now, for Peter's sake—if you know where he lives, get out there and stick to him. We've got this whole game in our hands if you stick with Lerner. I'm going to do this story—and whatever you do—find Lerner and hang on, and——"

"And," echoed the obedient Miller.

"And say nothing!"

CHAPTER XV

SETTING THE SCENE

CORONER STEVEN STRAITON furnished an admirable example of that type of small city physician who slides naturally down the scale of medical practise from a promising beginning to a vaguely shady middle life, remaining always, apparently, within the restraining bounds of the ethics of the profession, yet managing, somehow, to secure the reputation of being willing to undertake cases that the more reputable members of the Medical Association would not touch.

Coroner Straiton was a short, pudgy little man, scant of both breath and manners. His little red face always purpled apoplectically during an inquest, and he seemed literally to be bursting apart with the idea of his own tremendous importance.

It would have been difficult to secure, from the physicians of the city, a recommendation of the activities of Doctor Steven Straiton, before that worthy became Coroner Straiton, and, therefore, at inquests, entitled to a respect for his official character that his personality never even remotely suggested.

The opinion obtained, quite generally, that the pompous little man's term in office had about run its course, and a less choleric and dogmatic individual had already been chosen to succeed him, much to the relief of the reputable members of the medical fraternity. Of these things, however, Coroner Straiton knew nothing as he puffed noisily from the depths of a comfortable armchair in Inspector Herndon's office and aired his self-important views of the medical profession from the days of Hippocrates.

The inspector was dead tired. The strain of the fire and the attending happenings had been too much even for the professional detective, and he more than half wished that he could rid himself of the coroner who was fast becoming a nuisance with his important mouthing of commonplaces.

No one could listen long to Coroner Steven Straiton without feeling an overpowering desire to shake the pudgy greasy man into some semblance of a show of common sense. His speech was slow and hesitating; his choice of words meticulously careful, and, not infrequently, wrong, and the affected manner in which he delivered himself of his sentences soon grated on the nerves of even the most equable listener.

"We have—ah—set the inquest for—ah—nine o'clock in the morning. I should not presume that the hour is too—ah—early—ah—Mr. Inspector."

The inspector shook his head. "Naw, it ain't too early if I can get to bed sometime to-night."

Doctor Straiton, however, did not take the broad hint, but continued his remarks in the same nerve-shattering fashion:

"I—ah—understand that—ah—the very estimable chief physician of the—ah—Harris Hospital—Doctor—ah—Edward Lester—ah—was in attendance during the—ah—final earthly moments of the late—ah—Mr. Avery."

"You understand right." The inspector was becoming irritable and seemed in a fair way toward openly telling the coroner his real opinion of him.

"And who would you—ah—suggest," re-began the fat little man, "—ah—that is to say, who is it that you—ah—desire particularly to be called at the forthcoming—ah—investigation which I—ah—shall conduct."

The inspector frowned heavily. This was a matter that required serious consideration, and he had not yet had one private moment since the fire, in which to consider all the circumstances and endeavor to think matters out.

There was a large question in the inspector's mind as to whom to suspect in the matter. For one thing, he had definitely determined that the younger MacDonald was, in some manner, connected with the crime. Added to the guilt of the man—of which the inspector no longer entertained the slight-

est doubt—in the matter of the telephone calls and the warning note, he knew that the young man had been present at the fire. Hence, his deduction that Raymond MacDonald was involved in the crime was but a natural one.

When news of the fire had reached the inspector he was peacefully reading his favorite author, sitting in his stocking feet and shirt-sleeves; collar wide open and sleeves rolled to the elbows, utterly at peace. He had rushed immediately to the house, using the Police Department car which the inspector on occasion kept parked in his own garage to save the city the additional cost of the storage; at least, this was his explanation of the reason he took the crimson roadster with him on frequent evenings.

He had remained at the fire until after his conversation with Doctor Lester, after which he returned to his own office accompanied by the leech-like coroner whom he had encountered near the scene.

Shortly after his arrival at the house the inspector had seen MacDonald engaged in conversation with one of the younger assistant fire chiefs, but had lost sight of him almost immediately. He was, therefore, unable to form a very clear idea of that young man's possible movements, and he mentally determined to question the fireman in whose company MacDonald had been seen.

It seemed to the inspector that Raymond Mac-

Donald had left the scene of the fire, for he did not again catch a glimpse of the young man, not even when the Skipper had so heroically effected the rescue of the dying Avery from the burning building.

But the inspector was not led astray by this fact. He realized how easy it was, in the attending turmoil, for the younger man to have been quite unaware of what had transpired at the western side of the house.

Harry Lerner's dash into the front of the house had almost immediately been diagnosed by the inspector as an attempt on the part of Lerner to save his chief. Lerner had, naturally, assumed—so the inspector reasoned—that Avery was or had been at work in the library of his house and that he had been overcome by smoke, or by a physical accident. So Lerner's dash into the dwelling was to be reasonably explained.

The Skipper's quixotically heroic action did not lack motivation. And the inspector wondered how matters would have turned out had Avery been alive and in position to reward his rescuer. Perhaps in the whole circumstance of Lucian Avery's death, the only regret felt by Inspector Herndon was the fact that the Skipper's rescue had not served its purpose. Of course, old man MacDonald knew all the circumstances attending on the quarrel between Avery and his niece and her husband, and the

Skipper had conceived the idea of attempting to rescue the promoter in the hope that the man's gratitude to his savior would extend to the savior's family. The inspector wondered whether this would have been the case, and whether the MacDonald family's reconciliation with Avery would have been effected. In any event, the little Skipper—already a friend of long-standing—took new proportions in the inspector's eyes. The old sailor had proved himself more of a man than hundreds of the younger generation that had crowded about the house.

And, to round out his thoughts, the fact that Lerner had returned empty-handed from the house came to mind. Plainly then the lawyer had found the library untenanted; had assumed that Avery was safe, despite the rumors that were flying thick through the crowd, and had fought his way back to the open air.

The few questions that the inspector had been able to ask the hysterically excited housekeeper had drawn from Mrs. Mallows only the information that she had turned in the alarm by telephoning from the servants' quarters far from the house to which place she had run on first seeing signs of the fire.

The woman's condition precluded the possibility of closer questioning at the time and the inspector had dropped her almost immediately from his mind.

Since the fact of the murder had been established the inspector had not seen Mrs. Mallows, although he knew that she was recovering from the shock of the fire in the home of Avery's nearest neighbor.

"Let's see," he muttered drowsily, in reply to the coroner's question. "You've got to have the house-keeper, the butler and the chauffeur; that's all the servants, I think."

"I—ah—I have already anticipated the need of these—ah—important witnesses." Doctor Straiton nodded judiciously in his chair.

"Then there's young MacDonald—Raymond MacDonald—I want him," the inspector continued, "and Harry Lerner: he was Avery's legal adviser."

Coroner Straiton hummed thoughtfully. "Yes—that's true," he murmured. "Quite true—quite true." As though there had been some previous doubt of the inspector's information. "And—ah—who else?"

The inspector bit reflectively on a cigar which he had taken from a humidor on the desk before him, and absently passed the container to the coroner.

"Better put down old man MacDonald," he suggested. "Hate to pull the old Skipper out of bed, and I don't guess we really need him. I don't know, though——"

"Ah—he should be able to furnish the—ah—very essential information of where the—ah—body was discovered. Ah—an estimable old gentleman—

ah—quite an estimable man of—ah—a previous generation, as it were. Ah—yes, the elder MacDonald, by all means.”

The inspector frowned a moment in silence. “Was there a maid in the house?” he inquired.

Coroner Straiton’s mien was one of deep cogitation. “Ah—I have neglected to inquire. It seemed scarcely—ah—necessary but the—ah—excitement and—ah—concomitant mental reactions—ah—so to speak, prevented my making the usually careful and searching—ah—inquiry into the domestic arrangement of—ah—Mr. Avery’s—ah—domicile.”

The inspector fidgeted nervously. He began to realize that it would be necessary to take the coroner in on the story of the note and the telephone calls which had come to him and to the office of the *Times-Union*. They were too important, the inspector knew, to be ignored, and plainly they had considerable bearing on the murder of Lucian Avery.

So he laid aside his heavy cigar, and, interrupted only by the oft-recurring ejaculations of astonishment that came from between the pursed lips of the fat man opposite him, the inspector narrated the entire matter of the telephone calls and the receipt of the warning note before the tragedy.

“There is not the—ah—slightest shadow of doubt, Mr.—ah—Inspector,” Doctor Straiton began positively as the inspector finished; “not the remot-

est shadow, sir, that the—ah—instigator of these—ah—most unaccountable messages is also the—ah—criminal who assaulted Mr.—ah—Avery with such grievous, such very grievous results.”

The inspector shrugged. His tired brain was becoming indifferent to the problem.

“It will immediately—ah—become the duty of the—ah—department of which you are the—ah—nominal head, sir,” the pompous coroner continued, “to—ah—apprehend the culprit, the—ah—unhappy man who is responsible to the law, sir, for these—ah—messages. If he could be brought—brought, I say, sir—to the inquest of to-morrow, the—ah—official work of the—ah—coroner would be greatly—ah—facilitated, so to speak. Greatly facilitated and—ah—lightened, I might say.”

The inspector only breathed heavily, lacking even the necessary energy to call the puffy little man’s attention to the fact that it was no part of his official labor to outline the duties of the inspector’s department.

To shut off the interminable flow of the coroner’s hesitating conversation, and to obviate the necessity of listening indefinitely to the irritating voice, the inspector explained what Lucian Avery’s attitude had been when notified of the telephone calls and the note.

“Avery said he knew who it was,” the inspector volunteered, and Coroner Straiton shook his head

as though thoughtfully disagreeing with a conclusion arrived at only after due and deliberate consideration.

"The late—ah—Lucian Avery," he commented, "was a man of—ah—singular attainments; most singular and—ah—excellent—yes, excellent I venture to say. I do not for the briefest—ah—moment doubt, Mr.—ah—Inspector, that he—ah—fully understood—ah, comprehended, that is, the—ah—entirely unprecedented situation."

In the back of the coroner's head had begun to revolve the idea that this inquest on which he was about to become engaged was a thing of larger proportions than any he had ever been called upon to handle during his tenure of office.

Lucian Avery's death, while calling forth no universal mourning, was destined to react strongly, both in the city of Jacksonville and on the state. Financial conditions were teetering precariously on the brink of panic in the city, and it had been Avery's strong hand that had held the weakening powers in line.

Coroner Straiton, despite his ludicrous seriousness of manner and his puerile affectation of dignity, realized that the public might not be satisfied with the customary verdict of "...at the hands of a person or persons unknown." His brain began to busy itself with the possibilities of the case, even as he spoke to the inspector:

"Is that—ah—all of the list, Mr.—ah—Inspector?" He reverted to the matter of witnesses.

The inspector thought a moment. "No. Put down this guy Ranson and also Milller, both from the *T-U*. They were on the job at the fire; and Doctor Lester, of course. He assisted at the autopsy, didn't he?"

"It is possible," admitted Doctor Straiton slowly. "It is, indeed, fairly probable. Yes, I should—ah—venture to go on record as—ah—saying that it is—ah—*extremely* probable."

The inspector's mood was not one that could stand indefinitely the inanities mouthed by the coroner and now he turned angrily to his desk.

"That's all," he grunted.

"Mm!" Coroner Straiton pursed his little lips. "We—ah—have not as yet entered in our—ah—list the name of the—ah—young woman who served the late Mr.—ah—Mr. Avery in the capacity of—ah—secretary;" he reminded.

The inspector nodded. He did more: he began to think. He recalled the doctor's intense interest in the whereabouts of the girl at the time of the fire, and his own assurance to the doctor that she had not been seen. The inspector sent a sudden sharp glance at the fat man in the chair who tapped his list of names thoughtfully with a silver pencil. But the rotund face of Coroner Straiton was innocent of guile.

"All right," grunted the inspector, anxious to be rid of the man. He wanted to puzzle over the matter of Miss Irma Watkins' absence from the house. So he came heavily to his feet.

"That's all. And I'm tired. Good night."

Coroner Straiton seemed mildly astonished at the inspector's gruff ending of what had seemed, to him, a pleasant and profitable conversation; nevertheless he rose with dignity, pulled his waistcoat deliberately over his belt and turned to the door. The inspector breathed a fervent sigh of relief, but on the threshold the coroner hesitated and turned.

"Don't you deem it—ah—advisable," he questioned, "to call—ah—the niece of the—ah—late Mr. Avery? Mrs.—ah—Raymond MacDonald, I believe."

The inspector's patience burst its bounds. "What th' hell for?" he queried roughly. Then: "Call the whole damned town—summon 'm all. *I* don't care."

And, startled at the violence, and mentally deciding that Inspector Herndon was less a gentleman than he had often thought, Coroner Straiton made his exit with a pompous little bow in the direction of the irate official.

The door had scarcely closed behind him, however, when it again opened and the inspector, who was reaching gratefully for his hat, stooped and turned to meet the gaze of Coleman Ranson.

The *Times-Union* representative entered without ceremony. He deposited several long loose sheets of paper on the inspector's desk.

"Proof," he explained, "of the story for the morning edition. Pretty quick work, if I do say it. Want to look it over?"

Tired as he was the inspector turned with undisguised interest to the proof sheets.

The city editor had urged Ranson to "spread the story all over the place" and Ranson had not failed to obey. A seven-column streamer blared the succinct fact of the murder; then followed the long account of Avery's last projected deal; the fire in Ortega in all its details, and speculations on the identity of the murderer, ending with the ancient phrases: "The Detective Department net is already drawing about the suspect, and the able hand of Inspector Herndon can already be seen in the masterly manner in which the case is being handled."

The inspector was pleased. He had feared that his gruffness at the scene of the fire had ruffled the feelings of Ranson, and he had thought, with little pleasure, of the accounts that the newspaper would carry of the crime and the fire. But where the *Times-Union* led, the *Metropolis* would, of necessity, follow in its later editions, and the inspector was grateful for the boost of the department which marked the *Times-Union* story of the crime.

Ranson had devoted a separate story to detail the

heroism of old man MacDonald, and the inspector nodded his entire agreement with the highly laudatory account of the attempted rescue of Lucian Avery.

"How is the Skipper?" the inspector questioned when he had finished his reading. "You haven't seen him, have you?"

Ranson tapped a cigarette against a box in his hand. "No," he answered. "The Skipper's laid up. I had young Mac on the wire and he told me that Doc Lester had just left the house a minute ago with the strictest sort of orders that the old man wasn't to be disturbed on any conditions."

The inspector tchicked commiseratingly with his tongue.

"Hope the old man comes round all right. Besides," and a tired grin overspread the inspector's features, "that kid o' mine has been worryin' the life out o' me to ask the Skipper when he was going to begin on the schooner he promised to carve for him."

The inspector lighted his cigar and dropped again into his chair. Outside the early streaks of dawn battled with the sputtering arc-lights. Plainly it would be worth while to lose a little additional sleep for the purpose of talking with Ranson, if for no other reason than to continue in the good graces of that momentarily exceedingly important young man.

"Got any idea?" The inspector threw out the question with a wide gesture.

Ranson did not pretend to misunderstand. "I've got one mighty good hunch," he admitted. "One mighty good hunch."

"Are you tellin' it?" The inspector felt that it would do no harm to display some interest. It was even possible that he might learn something, although he doubted it, that had not yet occurred to him.

"No, I don't mind." Ranson puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette. "I've got a man watching that hunch of mine right now—it's Harry Lerner."

"The lawyer?"

"Yes." Ranson did not seem overly enthusiastic about the matter.

"Huh!" The inspector humphed skeptically. "Think you're off," he grunted. "I ain't worryin' about it until I can sleep on it," he explained, "but the best bet as the cards lie is named MacDonald."

"What's that?" The suspicion startled Ranson. "Raymond MacDonald?"

The inspector tapped his cigar against a tray to release the ashes. "Mind you," he warned, "this ain't for publication just yet, but that's the guy I'm gambling on."

Ranson dropped his cigarette. "Then you lose,"

he advised definitely as he rose to his feet. "You've got it wrong; all wrong, and I *know*."

"Yeh?" The inspector rose also. "And how do you know, if you don't mind tellin'?"

"I know," Ranson advised, gathering up his proof sheets, "for the very simple reason that Raymond MacDonald was with me for an hour before the fire, and, after it started, he was never out of sight of Assistant Chief Rainey—as I have already ascertained."

The inspector took this blankly. The wind suddenly slid from his sails, for there was no questioning the alibi. He shook his head as though to dispel some accumulated mist and reached again for his hat.

"Well," he admitted grudgingly, "that seems to let *him* out."

CHAPTER XVI

QUESTIONS

THE inquest of the murder of Lucian Avery was held in the Harris Hospital in Ortega. The publishing of the news of the death of the capitalist had staggered the city of Jacksonville. Rumors of suicide, though flatly denied by the newspapers, served to key interest to a fever pitch. Vague, ominous hints were heard: the First National Bank was threatened with insolvency; the large naval-stores operators, Henwiffer and Mogal—long friendly to the Avery interests—were shaky; the Public Gas Corporation would soon be bankrupt; the Florida Railway of Jacksonville was to be put into the hands of receivers instantly. These and more menacing speculations leaped lightning-like across the city, having no ground in truth as was demonstrated by the early noon edition of the *Metropolis*.

And while the rumors were at their wildest, about the long mahogany table in the Harris Hospital sat eight men: the six jurors, the official reporter and the pompous figure of the coroner which adorned the large armchair at one end of the table.

Before the coroner lay several closely typed pages of questions. It was evident that Coroner Steven Straiton was going to do his level best to bring out some information that would enable his carefully selected jurors to return a finding with which no fault could be found by the thousand critics of the expectant city.

The little man puffed importantly as he gazed about him. "If you are—ah—ready, gentlemen, we will—ah—have the first witness. Miss—ah—Miss Watkins."

Detective Jackson, impressed into service much against his will, entered the room and received his instructions from the coroner.

"You will request Miss—ah—Watkins kindly to appear before us." The coroner drew his chair closer to the table, grasped his silver pencil and prepared to do his official duty without fear or favor.

Irma Watkins entered quietly. There was just the barest hint of tears in her eyes, and the color of her cheeks was, perhaps, a trifle too vivid. The girl's thoughts, in the time that had elapsed since she had heard the news of the murder of Lucian Avery had been all for the MacDonald family, and she feared—without being able exactly to formulate thoughts—that some horrible cataclysm impended.

She turned to the coroner and nodded the barest of greetings to that gentleman's important: "Mr. Ferrell will administer the—ah—oath, and you will

—ah—please be seated here.” He indicated a chair directly facing the six jurors, in which the girl took her seat.

“Miss—ah—Watkins is your name?”

“Irma Watkins, yes.”

“Age?”

“Twenty-two.”

“Occupation?”

“Private secretary to—to—”

“Ah, yes. Secretary to—ah—the late Mr. Lucian Avery.”

The girl inclined her head. She made no attempt to hide the fact that she was nervous. Her eyes went appealingly to the men sitting about the polished table, and the sudden glance that she directed at Coroner Straiton and the color that came and went in her cheeks made her seem more attractive to the six very ordinary human beings who constituted the coroner’s jury, and, as she glanced nervously across the table, only smiles of encouragement met her eyes.

“You will—ah—please inform these assembled—ah—gentlemen when—ah—at what time you last saw your—ah—late employer alive, and—ah—ahem!—just what your—ah—movements were immediately thereafter.”

The girl nodded her understanding of the question, and her voice when she replied was pitched in so low a key that it was necessary for the coroner

to lean uncomfortably forward in his chair in order to hear.

"I saw Mr. Avery last in the library," she began, playing unconsciously with a small hand-bag in her lap. "It was about seven o'clock; I don't know exactly. I went in to ask if there was anything else for the evening, and he said there was not."

"Was it—ah—customary for you to do this, Miss—ah—Watkins?"

Again the girl nodded. "Yes, I always asked him when I intended leaving the house."

"Then you—ah—*did* leave the house?" The coroner's question did not take into consideration the fact that the girl must have left the house before the fire; else she could not have been present at that moment. Even Detective Jackson, standing with folded arms against the closed door, grinned his amusement at the question.

"Yes. After Mr. Avery said that there was nothing else I left the house to go to see a—a—friend."

The coroner's ears literally pricked up. "May we—ah—inquire," he questioned politely, "just who the—ah—friend was?"

The girl flushed at the manner of the question, and Jackson's beetle-brow drew into a scowl, while one of the jurors sent a sudden frowning glance of disapproval in the direction of the entirely unconscious questioner.

"It was Mrs. MacDonald," the girl replied. "Mr.

MacDonald had telephoned to ask me to come out there."

"Ah—which Mr. MacDonald?"

The girl was silent a moment. She appeared to be framing her reply. "The elder," she answered finally.

"And was this—ah—request also—ah—usual?"

The girl was becoming more and more nervous and she twisted the silver chain handle of the bag about her thin fingers. "It—it wasn't unusual," she answered. "He frequently called me to ask me to come around to talk with Clara—Mrs. MacDonald."

The coroner carefully reset the horn-rimmed glasses that gave his full-moon face an almost ridiculous appearance.

"Mrs. MacDonald—ah—was, I believe Mr. Lucian Avery's—ah—relative?"

"Yes; his niece."

"You were quite—ah—well acquainted with her?"

"We—we have always been friends and continued to be friends after—after—"

"I—ah—think we understand, Miss—ah—Watkins." The coroner glanced about the table and nods of comprehension met his eyes. It was not necessary, it seemed, to go into the banishment of the niece of Lucian Avery.

The girl continued to twist the chain about her

fingers, and her breath came more quickly as she awaited further questions.

"You—ah—you did not leave Mrs.—ah—MacDonald?"

"No. I stayed there until—until the ambulance with the Skipper—with the elder Mr. MacDonald arrived, and, and—"

"Yes?"

"And, after that, I remained in the house all night. You see I had nowhere to go." She raised her eyes to the coroner's, and that gentleman turned a violent red, after which he bowed with extreme gravity.

"Thank you, Miss—ah—Watkins. That will be all for the—ah—moment."

The girl rose slowly from her chair and passed through the door held open by Jackson, to whom the coroner now called:

"We will have Mrs.—ah—Mallows, if you—ah—please." He turned his eyes, behind their large, ludicrous glasses, to his jurors. "We may as well, gentlemen,—ah—finish with the—ah—ladies immediately—ah—so to speak." And a very weak chuckle greeted his pleasantry.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Mallows, entered the room briskly. She appeared to be a woman of forty, or thereabouts, and the angles of her sharp face spoke of a character hardly short of Xanthippean. If Mrs. Mallows had been hysterically prostrated at the

scene of the fire, certainly no evidence of the fact remained. She seemed, above all things, quite collected and cool, and she faced the coroner with a grim set to her thin lips.

Mrs. Mallows bore no love to public officials of whatsoever degree and dignity; her dislike beginning with Inspector Herndon and including all and sundry.

"You are—ah——" the coroner began his questioning.

"I am Aida Mallows;" the interruption came in a sharp snapping voice. "I am a widow and have been housekeeper for Mr. Avery for more than two years since the marriage of his niece. My room was in the west wing of the house just beyond that occupied by Miss Watkins, whose was next to Mr. Avery's. I left the house at six-thirty after seeing that preparations had been made for dinner. Mr. Avery invariably dined alone. I visited Miss Mathilde Jenkins on the Ortega Boulevard; a spinster lady of my own age and an extremely agreeable person, despite her limited experience with men."

The sudden flow of information startled Doctor Straiton and he blinked his little eyes rapidly while a snicker of open amusement ran infectiously down the table, and Detective Jackson turned his face to the closed door to hide his mirth.

"I—ah—that is—you will please refrain from—ah—"

"Well, what else is it that you wish to know?" The question snapped briskly. "If you can't ask, why don't some of these other dummies speak?"

A ludicrously sheepish look replaced the smiles of amusement on the faces of the jurors.

Doctor Straiton drew himself to the full of his ridiculously short height in his chair and transfixed Mrs. Aida Mallows with what was meant to be a dignified stare. He even forgot to hesitate in his speech.

"You discovered the fire?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I came back from my call at precisely twelve minutes to nine. I left Miss Jenkins at twenty minutes to nine and it takes exactly eight minutes to walk the distance. I approached from the west and saw a column of smoke coming from the windows on that side of the house. I hurried to the servants' quarters and found the butler there. The chauffeur has been away for a week on vacation. From there I telephoned the alarm to the city."

"Ah—Mrs.—ah—Mallows—" the coroner was regaining his professional aplomb. "From—ah—whose windows was the—ah—smoke you mention—ah—emanating?"

"What?" Mrs. Mallows eyed the coroner balefully. "Oh, you mean whose windows the smoke was coming from. Mr. Avery's, I think——"

"You—ah—*think*?" The coroner became haughty. "Then you do not know?"

But Mrs. Mallows was not to be awed by haughtiness. "I said I think," she repeated decisively, "When I mean I think I say I think, and when I mean I know I say I know."

The coroner was utterly squashed.

"Then—then the—ah—smoke," he queried after he had slightly recovered, "the smoke may have been—ah—issuing from the windows of the—ah—chamber occupied by—ah—Miss—ah—Watkins, or your—ah—your own?"

"It *may* have been yes, but I don't think it was."

There was no arguing with Mrs. Mallows, and her eyes transfixed the pompous coroner as he sat silent.

"There is one question you have not asked me," she reminded bitingly, "and that is when I last saw Mr. Avery alive." And, before Doctor Straiton could think of a sufficiently crushing retort, she answered her own question. "It was just at six thirty-seven. I was leaving the house and looked into the library to ascertain if Miss Watkins was there. I desired to tell her of my departure. She was not, but Mr. Avery was sitting at the table writing."

"You left Mr. Avery alone?"

"Of course. Do you think that I would disturb him to say I was going out?" There was a wither-

ing scorn in Mrs. Mallows' voice as though the coroner had reflected on her abilities in some manner. "Mr. Avery was invariably alone at night. Hindon, the butler, always remained until eight o'clock, and, after preparing Mr. Avery's mineral water, he left the house also."

"Mineral water?" The coroner's face screwed into a thoughtful knot. "Mr. Avery drank mineral water?"

To this the witness did not even deign to reply, and the coroner was satisfied. As a matter of record, he was more than satisfied.

"That is enough—ah—quite enough, I should say—yes—ah—quite enough. We—ah—we thank you."

And Mrs. Mallows trudged stiffly from the room while a long breath of relief went up from the assembled men. One juror turned to his neighbor and whispered. This procedure, however, was immediately frowned down by the coroner.

The testimonies of Coleman Ranson and Hugo Miller of the *Times-Union* merely established the facts of their arrival at the fire, and detailed their movements during the course of it. On the whole, the coroner began to realize that he was making but little headway. The fact was that the self-important ex-doctor knew very little of the legal side of his position of coroner, and certainly that smattering of legal knowledge that he had acquired by association

with courts and criminals scarcely gave him the necessary foundations to preside properly over a court of first instance.

Raymond MacDonald's testimony brought no new facts to light.

"It is—ah—quite generally understood—ah—believed, I should say—that—ah—your marriage to—ah—the late Mr. Avery's niece quite—ah—estranged that young lady from—ah—from her—ah—avuncular relation."

The form of the sentence did not technically constitute a question, but the young man in the witness chair answered.

"Your understanding is correct."

The coroner considered this while he made meaningless marks on the paper before him in an important manner.

Nothing could be gained by this course of questioning. This he immediately realized, although it was a sore temptation to dig, personally, into the affairs of the MacDonald family. Above all things Doctor Steven Straiton loved a satisfying scandal, and he had never felt quite sufficiently informed of Avery's reasons for banishing his niece and her husband.

But the ex-doctor regretfully passed by this opportunity. He knew that it would serve only to antagonize the young man, and this he had no inten-

tion of doing. Raymond MacDonald's movements could be traced very easily from the time he arrived at the fire in the car with the two reporters, and the witness was dismissed.

It was the testimony of Doctor Edward Lester that threw most light on the tragedy, and that only of a nature tending to make certain the method and manner of the crime and in no way implicating any particular person.

The doctor's heavy face bore visible marks of the mental strain of the past few hours; a strain in no wise lessened by an unsatisfactory conversation he had just ended with Irma Watkins. The girl had told him simply what she had related under oath at the coroner's questioning, adding no word of information concerning her own fears and suspicions. This seeming lack of confidence, together with her reticence on the subject of the murder, coupled with the words that the doctor alone knew, led the huge man's torturous thoughts ever into deeper channels of graver suspicion.

His open buoyant nature could not tolerate nor understand concealment of any kind and yet his mind refused to consider the conclusion that was being inevitably forced upon it by his own stern all-facing logic. And the logic was flawless. His own common reasoning power could not but admit that the case against Irma Watkins, were it made public, would look very black.

But whatever his thoughts, never for an instant did the man's loyalty to the girl tremble in the slightest. Such was the nature of the man. The one thing that he feared, the thing that he would not even hint to himself and strove valiantly to repress in his mind, was the possible reasons that could have forced the girl into such a whirlpool, and the doctor's masculine mind did not fail to suggest them.

The girl lived practically alone with Avery. And the doctor knew only too well the physical charms of Irma Watkins. If Lucian Avery had suddenly become aware that his secretary was an extraordinarily young and beautiful woman, and had dared —— But beyond this the man resolutely refused to think. He knew the nature of the brown-eyed girl, and he had seen those brown eyes flash out in sudden uncontrollable anger.

He muttered his answer to the oath and dropped heavily into the witness chair.

Stripped of the interrupting questions of Coroner Straiton, during which the big physician made no effort to conceal his opinion of Steven Straiton's medical training, the doctor's story was that he had, immediately on notification of the fact that Lucian Avery had arrived in the hospital, gone to the operating-room and examined the man. He had found him *in extremis* and had ordered him into a private room.

Yes—he had aided at the autopsy. The bullet

that had been responsible for Lucian Avery's death was a caliber thirty-eight.

No—the wound could not have been self-inflicted. Asked for the reasons that led to this conclusion, the big man explained that no powder marks appeared on the jacket of the pajamas that Avery wore, and that the hole through which the lethal projectile had made entry was small and clean.

There was no question but that the bullet had been the direct cause of the man's death, nor was it possible to tell how long he had lived after the shooting. The doctor could not venture an opinion, with any degree of definiteness, as to how long a man so wounded might be expected to live. There were the attending circumstances to be considered: the smoke and flame through which the man had passed and the badly wounded shoulder.

Yes—it was possible that the wound had been inflicted in the body of Avery by the bullet before the shoulder wound, although, from the position of the bullet it was fairly evident that it had been fired while Avery was lying prone on his back.

Could the bullet wound have resulted in the immediate unconsciousness of Avery?

It could have, and in all probability it had. It was possible, however, that the man had retained consciousness even after both the bullet wound and the wound of the shoulder had been inflicted, although unlikely.

It was also possible that the man had been asleep when either or both wounds were inflicted.

Did the wounded shoulder give the appearance of having been mutilated by a blow? It did not. The wound was a crushing one that shattered the shoulder and the right upper portion of the breast. It seemed to have been inflicted by a falling beam. No—it was not humanly possible that a man could have struck in such a manner.

The doctor could offer no suggestion nor could he hazard an opinion whether the shoulder might not have been injured *after* the revolver shot. The bullet wound could have been inflicted either before or after the shoulder injury. There were no means of ascertaining the facts. No—the wounded shoulder alone would not, necessarily, have proved fatal, although it is possible that Lucian Avery might have expired from this, together with the exposure to the fumes of the fire. It was certain, however, that the bullet was the direct cause of death.

Yes—he was in attendance on the elder MacDonald. That heroic gentleman was confined to bed, but would, in all probability, soon recover from his severe burns.

The doctor ambled from the room with his heavy rolling stride, his mind again filled with thoughts of Irma Watkins. Try as he would the big doctor could not put the thought aside, even for an instant.

During his entire time in the witness chair the

man had been haggard and fearful of the possibility that the blundering coroner would stumble into a series of questions that would necessitate his laying before that jury the suspicions which were his alone, and it was with a feeling closely akin to relief that the door closed behind the doctor.

When the name of Harry Lerner was called by the now perspiring coroner, a sudden stir of interest moved the lethargic jurymen.

The lawyer took his seat, outwardly calm, and smiling condescendingly. The witness chair held no terrors for him; nor did his expression change one iota, when, after having established the lawyer's relations with the murdered man, the coroner leaned far over the table:

"And why—Mr.—ah—Lerner, did you dash into the—ah—burning house at the—ah—imminent risk of loss of life and limb?"

The lawyer's answer was merely that he had hoped to find Lucian Avery in the library; that he knew the man habitually worked there and that he had half-expected that his chief had been overcome and was unable to leave the house.

"And as to the—ah—manner in which you spent the—ah—approximately five minutes that you—ah—were in the house?"

To this Lerner shrugged. He had sought Avery in the library; then in the study, had thought of attempting a dash up the stairway, but had been pre-

vented by a sudden cloud of acrid smoke which had nearly overpowered him.

Coroner Straiton was at loss as how exactly to formulate his questions to the man in the witness chair. The explanations that Lerner had made of his movements seemed reasonable and straightforward, yet—

The coroner knew quite well the reputation of Lerner, and knew, therefore, that no matter what may be said of the man's personal behavior, no one ever questioned his undoubted legal ability—even though deploring the use to which it was put.

The puffy little ex-doctor was quite satisfied that the calmly smiling lawyer was planning to humiliate him in some manner, and he realized the risk of accusing the man openly. Still, there was the matter of possibility. Lerner *could* have committed the crime.

The witness was dismissed—temporarily.

At this juncture Coleman Ranson entered the jury room. For a minute he talked earnestly into the private ear of the pudgy little man whose eyes grew large with surprise as he listened, and who suddenly nodded his head vigorously at a whispered suggestion.

Mr. Harry Lerner was requested to return for a moment to the inquest room and to the witness stand.

The coroner gave the lawyer no time to settle

himself comfortably, and to speculate, if he so desired, on the possible reason for recalling him.

Now the coroner, thanks to the whispered information of Coleman Ranson, felt certain of his ground, and his eyes peered steadily at Harry Lerner as that gentleman crossed the room and dropped into the chair.

Then, with a full appreciation of the dramatic intensity of the moment, and forgetting entirely his ordinarily affected hesitancy of speech, the coroner pointed a sudden accusing finger at the lawyer:

"And will Mr. Harry Lerner tell these assembled gentlemen just why he twice called by telephone and requested information of the death of Mr. Lucian Avery—while that gentleman was still alive?"

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE NET

THE inspector eyed Ranson thoughtfully across his desk in his office at Headquarters.

"You're holding Lerner?" Ranson put the question casually as though certain of an affirmative answer.

"You bet I'm going to hold him." The inspector was positive. "Say, if I can just hang those phone calls and note on him I'll have a case that will take six like him to break through."

"Well, if that's all you want, it isn't hard," Ranson remarked slowly. "I tipped Straiton off to asking him that question, you know. I was pretty sure he wouldn't answer it."

"Naw! Were you? What's the dope you got?" The inspector leaned forward interestedly. "How'd you get on to him?"

Ranson shrugged. "Through the drug-store people. A fellow down there kept a look-out for the man who phoned me the first time. Of course it was a wild chance, but I had the idea that the fellow lived somewhere in the neighborhood and it

proved correct. When the fellow appeared again the clerk phoned me right off and Miller went out to trail the man. It was Lerner all right, for I met him near the store myself, and brought him to town with me just before the fire last night."

"Sure the clerk couldn't 'a' been mistaken?" The inspector was anxious not to go wrong.

"He wasn't mistaken; I'll vouch for that. As a matter of fact Lerner was on the point of phoning me again from the drug store. He did call the paper, but I wasn't there."

"He might have had some news about that deal of Avery's."

The reporter shook his head in negation. "If he did have, he forgot it *pronto*, for he didn't say a word to me five minutes after he'd tried to get me on the phone. That's about how long it was after he tried that I found him."

"Say, what do you suppose his idea was?" The inspector looked more pleasantly at Ranson. It seemed that, after all, the young man was going to be of considerable assistance in getting action on the case, and the inspector knew only too well that instantaneous action was what the public demanded.

True enough, the panicky condition arising from Avery's sudden death had been ameliorated by statements from the members of the city council, and the earnest and repeated assurances of the newspapers that, despite the sudden withdrawal of Lucian Avery

from the city's activities and from the numerous enterprises which he virtually controlled, nothing even remotely resembling a panic was justified. The huge interests of the man continued to function under their several administrative heads, and, overnight the city had quieted. The inspector knew, however, that it would not be long before the cry was raised against the Detective Department for more than reiterated assurances of "clues" and suspicions. The public demanded facts and action: swift retributive action, and the inspector was determined that it should have both.

Ranson shrugged in reply to the inspector's query. "I can't dope it out," he admitted, "but there's one thing sure: Lerner did not deny the telephone calls, and he won't deny them when the time comes for him to talk. And it's a safe bet that he was responsible for the note on your desk also. He'll confess to that all right. The important thing is to get evidence against him on the other thing."

"You let me worry about that." The inspector's voice boded no good for Lerner. "I'll hang him higher'n a kite with the evidence just as it stands."

"Circumstantial?"

The inspector nodded. "'S enough. If he don't kick in with the whole story, we can work it out without him. I'm not afraid of that."

Ranson shook his head. "'Fraid you're wrong,

Inspector. You couldn't begin to convict him on the evidence you've got."

"The hell I can't!" The inspector was profanely certain. "Anyway," he continued more mildly, "I've got him, ain't I? And that's half the fight. It ain't as though I was stabbing around in the dark."

"Still," Ranson persisted, "suppose he explains his note and phone calls. Suppose he says they were a joke—or something like that?"

The inspector guffawed. "Yes, and suppose somebody believes him? Just suppose." The idea seemed to tickle him immensely. "And I guess he'll have a little explaining to do concernin' why he dived into the house, and just what happened during the time he was in there." The inspector nodded heavily: "That's the explanation that's goin' to land Mr. Harry Lerner where we want him."

Ranson did not, however, admit the completeness of the argument. "He's already given a fairly reasonable motive to the coroner, and——"

"Reasonable?" The inspector shot out the word disgustedly. "Hell! That yarn won't hold water two minutes."

Ranson tapped the desk before him with a pencil. "But you've got to prove it isn't true," he reminded. "And how do you propose to set about it?"

"He did the phonin', didn't he?" challenged the inspector. "You can prove he did that."

"He might as well admit that; we've got that much on him positively." Ranson admitted the inspector's first premise.

"And he must 've had some mighty good reasons behind that idea," the inspector went on. "Maybe he was trying——by the Lord! I've got it!"

"Got what?" Ranson ceased his scrutiny of the inspector's desk and met the official's eyes.

"Why, the whole thing's plain as day;" the inspector's voice rose triumphantly. "Lerner tried to scare Avery into or out of something. I don't know what it is, but I can damn soon find out. Avery wouldn't scare and Lerner was close enough to him to know he wouldn't scare. The note was another attempt: still Avery didn't show a sign. Remember he said he knew who was responsible for it all along. All right. If he couldn't scare him off he could put him where he couldn't do any damage——and that's what he did. There's no chance to go wrong on that line—and it's more than reasonable, ain't it?"

Ranson admitted that it was. It seemed fairly evident from the inspector's conclusion that Lerner was guilty. One thing remained to be established, however, the matter of motive. And Ranson knew that this presented no insuperable difficulties.

Harry Lerner's reputation had been, at best, none too savory before his association with Avery. True enough, there had been nothing definite in the lawyer's career that one could specifically point out:

nothing that contained sufficient proof of crooked dealing to warrant disbarment proceedings; yet it was generally conceded that one would not have to dig very deeply into Harry Lerner's affairs to find considerable that was more than questionable.

The very manner in which he had been picked up by Lucian Avery furnished room for any amount of speculation. Ranson began to see light. There was something, undoubtedly, that Avery had known of Lerner that wasn't common knowledge, and it was this something that Lerner feared. And this was why he attempted to frighten Avery—but, what could the lawyer have hoped to gain? Perhaps it had been Lerner's hope that Avery would leave the city for a while. This was possible, but unlikely. What then?

Ranson voiced his thought to the inspector, and the corrugated forehead of the official testified that he was thinking deeply of the subject.

When he spoke, however, his thoughts seemed to have been diverted from the main channel.

"Wonder if he chucked his gun into the room?" he speculated. "Yep; probably did. Wouldn't hardly 've been fool enough to bring it out with him."

"You didn't find one, did you?" Ranson took up the new thread.

"Of course not;" the inspector was scornful. "Any man with brains enough to plan and work out

a fire scheme like Lerner did wouldn't be ass enough to bring a gun out with him."

Ranson's hand shot out in a sudden gesture. "Wait a second. You think Lerner is responsible for the fire?"

The inspector frowned. "Dammit, I don't know. He couldn't have been, could he?"

"Hardly. Not when I was with him an hour before we knew of it. Remember I picked him up just beyond that drug store on Walnut Street."

"But he might have had it fixed." The inspector was becoming bewildered in the maze of his own reasoning.

"If that's so, then he must have killed Avery *before* I met him in Springfield, and that means that Avery was alive for nearly two hours before the fire started and that, all this time, he was mortally wounded."

The inspector considered this frowningly. "Well, it could 'a' been," he grumbled.

"Then what did he run into the house for right in the plain sight of the whole world?" Ranson knew that the question was unanswerable.

The inspector stroked his heavy chin thoughtfully. "Maybe," he began, "maybe he went in to make certain." Then he realized immediately the futility of his argument. "Say," he began again, but was interrupted by a voiced thought that had just occurred to the reporter.

"Remember, Lerner apparently didn't know a thing about the fire until he heard it at the same time I did. Don't forget that."

"Well?" The inspector chewed thoughtfully on a cigar. "That don't mean much. He might 've had the fire fixed and then beat it out to Springfield, and, when you picked him up and carried him back to Ortega, he might 've suddenly got excited and, like I said, wanted to make certain."

Ranson shook his head emphatically. "You're weakening your own case," he remarked, and the inspector knew it. "It doesn't stand to reason that he would not have made certain before."

"Just a minute," the inspector laid his cigar aside. "How's this: Lerner sets the house afire, thinking that, by burning it down, he can throw a real scare into Avery. Then, when he goes back to the fire with you, he sees a better chance. He hears that Avery is in the house and then does for him." Ranson did not reply and the inspector continued: "Did he raise any kick about coming back with you from Springfield?"

Ranson remembered the lawyer's actions: first the seeming willingness to accompany him to the city, and then the sudden suggestion that he would drop in at the *Times-Union* offices the following day.

The inspector drew a pad toward him on the desk.

"I'm going to write this thing out," he grunted. "Helps keep it straight."

Ranson rose to his feet. "Just a minute before you begin: does Lerner say anything at all?"

"Nothin'. Says he'll do his talkin' at the preliminary hearing."

Ranson turned slowly toward the doorway. The thousand possibilities that the murder of Lucian Avery had opened to his mind had, to some extent, confused him. A new idea occurred to him: one that was worth trying, at least.

Within a very few minutes he was in telephonic communication with Doctor Lester.

"There's no doubt about that having been a thirty-eight, is there?" This was the reporter's first question and the doctor's voice came thickly in answer:

"Not the least in the world. You can get the bullet if you want to look at it. Why? Got any idea?"

Ranson's answer was given unhesitatingly. "None particularly. You knew the inspector is holding Lerner, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't know!" The news interested the doctor. "How much—how much do you think he's got on him?"

Ranson's reply was tinged with doubt. "Maybe a lot, and maybe nothing much. We've got the phone calls on him anyway; the ones I told you

about. And Lerner refuses to explain them. He doesn't admit he did the phoning, but I can pin that on him all right. They're a good beginning, and that's something."

"You'll keep me informed, won't you?" The doctor's voice had an anxious tone, and Ranson hastened to assure him:

"I will that, Doc. But use your own head—it's a good one—and slip me your own idea. I won't publish it unless you say the word, and—by the way: how soon are you going to let me get an interview with the Skipper?"

The doctor hesitated a moment. "I'm going out there now," he replied finally, "and I'll let you know when you can talk to the old man. But, when you do go out, don't let him talk too much. And you'll have to promise not to try to see Clara—— she isn't in any state to——"

"Aw, come on, Doc." Ranson was satisfied with the promise of permission to see the Skipper. "We're not sob-sisters, you know."

But when the doctor turned from the instrument, he leaned back wearily in his chair before his desk. He no longer attempted to delude himself with the thought that Avery's last words had been delirious. The man was, unquestionably, sane and fever-free when he had spoken. The doctor's mind was not of the type that refused to face logical conclusions, and, as he sat staring stupidly before him at his desk, the

case against the woman he loved took definite form in his mind : a certain form that would not be denied. And it seemed to the sensitive feelings of the big man that the girl had avoided him since the tragedy.

Presupposing only the motive—and it was not difficult for the doctor to do that, once he faced the question squarely—there remained little doubt. The girl had, probably, gone to the house of MacDonald. That she had arrived there in a state of excitement he knew. Nor did he fail to realize that some natural excitement would attend on such a call as she had received from the Skipper, particularly in view of what had immediately preceded it. There was the matter of her failure to warn Clara in time to prevent her sale of the property to Lerner ; and her fear that her failure had had irremediable results.

What he had learned from the Skipper corroborated the girl's story, but the old man had been in no condition to talk clearly or think consecutively on the subject.

The doctor did not attempt to mask the fact that the girl had been alone in the house with Lucian Avery just prior to the time she left it. Could she, in a moment of great anger and self-protection, have killed Avery ? That was the question that confronted the physician ; a question more than half-answered in the affirmative by the gasped words of Lucian Avery himself.

The matter of the fire the doctor immediately dis-

carded. He was morally certain that the girl had not been guilty of arson. It was not hard to believe—and he had subconsciously determined so to believe—that the fire had been merely a startling coincidence. There was that wounded shoulder of Avery's. It was not difficult to envision the action. The girl had shot Avery who had fallen back into his own room. Then the girl had run from the house and to the home of the Skipper. The house which she had left had caught fire, and Avery had remained unconscious on the floor of his own room until pinned to his prone position by a falling beam.

The doctor again mentally reviewed the scene in the hospital, and the choked words of Avery seemed to pierce his ear. Could Irma Watkins "tell" who was responsible for the crime, or was the sentence some unfinished accusation against the girl?

The big man's haggard eyes stared burning before him, seeing nothing. Then the glint of the telephone instrument caught his staring glance and, almost without his volition, his view-point shifted to that of Ranson and the possibility of Lerner's guilt.

But, in the interim, the reporter had not been idle. When he had questioned the doctor on the telephone there had been more in his mind than the query had indicated. Nor had he forgotten the inspector's positiveness as to what had happened to the revolver with which the crime had been committed.

No sooner had he broken the connection with the hospital than he asked for his own office and was soon in communication with Hugo Miller.

The feature writer was bubbling with enthusiasm for the story, and he gave Ranson the address of Lerner's apartment without a question.

Then the reporter turned to his automobile, and was soon speeding to the Springfield address. He had in mind no very specific plans to gain entrance to Lerner's apartment, but he drew up beyond the ornate front of the apartment-house, and, waiting until the elevator had ascended, he hurried across the small lobby and up the stairs.

Only one door opened into Lerner's apartment from the hallway, and the door was locked.

For an instant the reporter hesitated. Near the elevator shaft an open window let out on a fire-escape. He quickly resolved to take the small risk attending on climbing out in view of any possible passers-by. In a moment he stood on the iron platform and grinned as he noted the small iron runway that connected a window of Lerner's apartment with the platform on which he stood.

While he was crossing he was debating the advisability of breaking the glass of the window and entering. It was not necessary, however, to resort to this course. The window—one of the French, swinging type—gave at his touch, and he pulled it carefully to him, closing the frame behind him as he

dropped through and to the carpeted floor of what appeared to be Harry Lerner's sitting-room.

Once inside the reporter looked about him. The apartment had been rented furnished. Beyond the open door that led to a bedroom still another door was visible, leading, doubtless, to a bathroom. The sitting-room in which he stood gave into the hallway by the elevator.

A quick glance about the living-room assured Ranson that nothing was to be learned there. He entered the bedroom and, almost immediately, his eye fell on what he had but half-expected to find. Plainly in view on a chiffonier in a corner of the room lay a glistening revolver.

The reporter grasped the weapon eagerly. It was of thirty-eight caliber, of a well-known make and "broke" in the middle for the purpose of loading and ejecting cartridges from the cylinder.

Ranson broke the weapon on the bed. Five greasy cartridges fell from the cylinder. There were no empty shells. He raised the weapon to his eyes but the rifling of the barrel twinkled and glistened in the reflected light.

Thoughtfully the young man reloaded the revolver. It was possible that Lerner could have returned to his rooms, cleaned his revolver and placed it thus conspicuously in sight. It was, however, unlikely.

The disappointment of the revolver dampened the

reporter's adventurous spirits. He hardly realized that he had hoped to find a telltale empty cartridge as he turned once more into the sitting-room, after only a cursory glance about the bedchamber. He listened a moment carefully at the door, then quickly let himself into the hall and heard the click of the safety latch as the door closed behind him.

Careless now of any possible observation he descended the stairs and turned into the street. As he took his seat in his shaking car, he saw the lumbering figure of Doctor Lester approaching.

The two men greeted each other quietly. The doctor's face bespoke the fact that things were not going well with him, but he immediately accepted the reporter's invitation to ride with him to the city.

The doctor had just come from the home of the Skipper. The old man was doing as well as could be expected, and the reaction of the tragic happenings on Clara MacDonald, while leaving her weak and shattered, had worked less harm than the doctor had fearfully anticipated. Irma Watkins was with the invalid at all times, and the girl had—deliberately it seemed to the mind of the doctor—given the big man no chance to speak with her alone.

When the car was well under way, the physician turned to the reporter.

"Just came from the MacDonalds," he volunteered. "Irma—er—Miss Watkins is there with them."

He was not conscious of the sudden little smile that tugged at the reporter's mouth. "How's the Skipper?" Ranson refrained from baiting the patiently miserable man.

"He'll do;" the doctor rumbled. "You can come out with me in the morning to see him if you like."

"Thanks. I'll drop by the hospital. What time?"

"Nine o'clock suits me."

Ranson nodded his agreement. "And how's the madam?"

The doctor heaved his heavy shoulders. "She's taking it mighty well—mighty well, considering. It won't hurt her now, I don't think."

The reporter did not know that the doctor had been unable to keep his every thought from the subject of Irma Watkins, and he could not know that the big man was fighting the battle of his life with himself and his suspicions.

On the one hand was arrayed the training of years; the high ideals and morals of an open life; the ethics of the practise of a noble profession and the innate, soul-deep honesty of the man, and, on the other was—his first love for a woman.

But the reporter did not know, nor could he have understood even had he known and seen the sudden poignant fear that leaped into the doctor's weary eyes as he suggested casually:

"Miss Watkins ought to be able to give me some dope. I think I'll drop in on her this afternoon."

CHAPTER XVIII

DOUBTS

THE silence that followed the reporter's suggestion remained unbroken, and Ranson, sensing that the doctor was, for some reason unwilling to speak of Miss Watkins, remained quiet until the car reached the city.

The reporter was busy with his own thoughts. The case against Lerner seemed complete, yet offered strangely contrasting possibilities. On the one hand was the chance that Lerner had committed the crime at the time he had dashed into the house, and during the progress of the fire. On the other was the more likely possibility that he had shot Lucian Avery and had then gone immediately to his home in Springfield, after which he had gone to the drug store for the purpose of again telephoning the *Times-Union*. And, during this time, the fire had commenced. The mere fact that Harry Lerner had possessed a thirty-eight revolver meant little in itself, but, if he could prove that the lawyer had returned to his home after he had been to Avery's house, something might be made of the fact that the re-

volver was in his rooms. With a sudden expression of impatience, Ranson realized that he had missed an opportunity; an opportunity to ascertain if, by any chance, there remained about the lawyer's rooms any signs that would indicate that Lerner had recently cleaned the revolver.

The reporter turned to the doctor as the car entered the city. "Shall I run you out to Ortega, or drop you somewhere in town?"

The doctor seemed, with a visible effort, to bring his thoughts back to the present.

"Oh—drop me anywhere—just anywhere in town."

Ranson drew the car up on the corner of Main and Forsythe Streets where the huge doctor descended. A realization of the unusual state of the medico's feelings was brought to the young reporter by the fact that the doctor did not even mutter his thanks for the ride, but only nodded absently and lumbered down Forsythe Street.

The big man walked undecidedly for a block, then, as though having come to a decision, he increased his pace and stood after traversing another block of Forsythe Street staring gloomily at the building which housed the Inspector of the Detective Department.

The appearance of the building was sufficient to depress the spirits of any one: a three-story, red brick structure, the high barred windows of the

second and third floors giving grim testimony of the purpose for which these floors were used. Near the door lounged a uniformed patrolman, who nodded pleasantly as the doctor appeared.

"Got another puzzle, Doc," he greeted. "Wonder if you can't lend a hand like you did last year on the bank business."

The huge doctor shook hands flabbily with the patrolman.

"Never can tell," he grumbled. "But I'm not a detective, you know."

"Don't have to be on this case;" chuckled the patrolman in reply. "Old Bruin's already landed his man, I think."

When the doctor entered the inspector's office he found that gentleman thoughtfully perusing a thick sheaf of typewritten paper, and nodding his head as though in entire agreement with the words before him. Considering the fact that the thesis in his hand was nothing other than the case he had made out against Harry Lerner, the inspector's nods were rather to be expected. He looked up when the doctor entered, and, with a manner far more amiable than was usual, he greeted the physician and indicated a large leather chair into which, after a mumbled greeting, the doctor sank wearily.

Automatically the big man fished into a coat pocket and brought out a crumpled package of cigarettes, one of which he lighted absently and puffed

with no evidence that he was conscious of the fact that he was smoking.

Finally the inspector laid aside the last page of the manuscript and swung about in his swivel chair to face the doctor.

"Well, Doc, I think I've got it about settled," he grunted.

"Lerner?" The name was the only question that came from the doctor.

"Yes, Lerner. There's not a doubt in the world—not one; the more I think about it the more certain I am. And there's just one thing I'd like to ask you, though."

The doctor's little eyes seemed to recede behind their puffy lids, but he gave no other sign of his perturbation. "All right; shoot."

"Just what is your own opinion of the time that Avery was shot? Was it, do you think, *before* the fire started, or did Lerner bump him off when he ran into the house while the fire was burnin'?"

The doctor shook his head. "I can't decide;" he answered. "There's no way of telling unless I could get a fairly definite idea of how long the fire had been burning when Avery was brought out of the house, and just what the conditions—smoke and such—were in the house while he was unconscious. And that's impossible."

The inspector continued to nod in agreement.

"Yep, that's what it is: impossible, but there's two ways this guy Lerner could have worked."

"Two ways?" The doctor shook off his lethargy and sat straighter in his chair. "How do you mean?"

"Well," the inspector crossed his legs comfortably, and reached for a cigar. "In the first place, this guy Lerner could 'a' potted Avery and set the house afire and then beat it out to Springfield; or, secondly, he could 'a' got him when he was in the house while it was burnin'. What do you think?"

Again the expressive shrug of the doctor's heavy shoulders.

"I don't know," he admitted. "The first sounds the more reasonable, although I'd hesitate to say that Avery had been shot more than a half-hour before he was brought to the hospital."

"That's it; that's what I'm driving at;" barked Inspector Herndon. "Could you testify, expert testimony, I mean, that Avery had *not* been shot more than a half-hour before you saw him? Could you?"

While the inspector was questioning the door opened to admit Hugo Miller. The feature writer nodded pleasantly to both men and dropped into a chair by the desk, helping himself casually to one of the inspector's cigars. He seemed very much interested in what the doctor would reply. In the reporter's hand was a carefully wrapped and tied bundle, and this he deposited on the desk.

"No," the doctor spoke only after careful consideration; consideration that he had gone over time and time again before, "I couldn't honestly testify that Lucian Avery was shot within the half-hour before he was brought to me. It might 've been two hours—or even three. I can't say."

"Then," the inspector continued triumphantly, while Hugo Miller smiled to himself in a superior fashion, "all your expert testimony would prove would simply be the fact that the bullet might 've got him either before or after the fire began, and that when he was hauled up to you it might have been, say, three hours after the actual shooting."

The doctor concurred silently in the inspector's conclusions, and seemed about to speak again when Hugo Miller interrupted:

"You think you've got it on Lerner, Chief? Holding him?"

"Not only holdin' him," answered the official, "but holdin' him tight. And I'll keep on holdin' him. There won't be a thing to the preliminary hearing but what will keep Mr. Lawyer Lerner safe in jail until a jury decides what to do with him."

"Has he talked?"

"No," the inspector shot out the monosyllable as though by remaining silent Lerner had personally insulted him. "But he will," he threatened. "Next

time I take a shot at him with the dope I've got now, he'll talk all right."

The doctor had heaved himself slowly to his feet. And with a nod to the inspector he turned to the door: "I'm at your service, Herndon, if I can help."

"Thanks, Doc, but I don't think we'll be needin' any help this time. Say, how's the old Skipper?"

"He'll do," the doctor's heavy face lighted. "He'll be all O. K. in a few days."

"Good stuff," chuckled the inspector; "that youngster o' mine is pesterin' the life out o' me to tell the Skipper to carve him that schooner he's promised."

It was only when the door had closed on the form of the doctor that Miller turned his attention to the inspector.

"Just a second, Chief," he said suggestively, "take a look at these pretty little things."

His fingers rapidly untied the strings that held the parcel on the desk together, and, with a dramatic gesture—fully in keeping with the best traditions of the detective of drama—he dumped on the inspector's mahogany desk two badly twisted and shattered revolvers.

The inspector glanced casually at the weapons, then at the expectant feature writer.

"What's the idea of the junk hardware?" he questioned sarcastically.

The writer was somewhat taken aback at the inspector's lack of interest.

"They're both thirty-eights," he advised, "and I dug 'em up out at Avery's house."

"Yeh?" No sign of interest dawned in the inspector's eyes. "Goin' to sell 'em for junk? Avery had quite an arsenal, didn't he?" His hand went out and turned over one of the twisted pieces of steel. "Don't expect to prove ownership on anybody by that stuff, do you?"

Miller frowned. "No, I don't," he answered snappily. "They're too much damaged for that."

"And, naturally," continued the inspector, mildly inquisitive, "naturally there ain't no exploded shells after that fire, are there?"

"Of course not; the explosion of the shells is probably what wrecked the guns. The heat, you know."

The inspector nodded, grinning. "Yes, it's a bad habit that heat's got. It always goes and messes things up."

His manner began to get under the man's hide, and Miller forgot the carefully planned speech that was to lead up to his climactic revelation. Instead he blurted: "And heat did that, too, I reckon?"

He shoved one of the wrecked revolvers beneath the inspector's nose, revealing, at the same time a few cartridge shells in his hand. Despite himself

the inspector started slightly. Then he recovered his poise. "Well, and what of it?"

Miller came around the desk. "There's this of it," he replied. "This shell here I jimmied out of this particular gun, and, if you'll examine it you'll see that this particular cartridge was not exploded by heat, but by the hammer of the gun!"

The inspector's raucous laugh was one of sheer amusement. "And I suppose that's the shot that killed Avery, ain't it?"

"I believe it is, yes."

"Sure it is; sure it is, sonny;" the inspector chuckled good-naturedly. "Now prove it."

"You know darned well it can't be done;" Miller exploded. "I can't prove anything. But here's one thirty-eight cartridge that was fired by the descent of the hammer. And one shot killed Avery; and, furthermore, the chances are mighty good that this was the shot."

"Sure, I ain't disputin' you." The inspector was elaborately polite. "I ain't disputin' you none, am I? Suppose that the very bullet from there did kill Avery? I'm more than agreeable—I'll say that very bullet did kill him. What have you said then? A whole arm full of nothing. Doc Lester hauled a thirty-eight bullet out of Avery at the autopsy, so we know what kind of a bullet killed him, don't we? Well? What're you goin' to prove with this junk?" The inspector raised his eyebrows as he gazed at the

discomfited Miller. "Better run along, sonny, and write your stories, and when you get a little *new* dope detectin' around, come in again."

The inspector's arm went out and swept the two guns into a desk drawer. "I'll save these little souvenirs, of course," he smiled. "They won't do a whole heap of convictin', though."

The inspector's attitude toward his find completely chastened the cock-sure Miller, and, within a few minutes, he was listening with entirely satisfactory meekness and respect to the case that the official had made out against the lawyer.

There was nothing for the feature man to do but agree with the inspector's conclusions, yet he did not feel that he should, at the first broadside of contrary evidence, discard the case he had so carefully worked out for himself. Besides, it would spoil absolutely the story he was then at work on.

"How'd the fire start?" He questioned the inspector.

That individual shuffled his papers carefully together. "Ain't sure," he replied carelessly. "Crossed wires, maybe."

Miller cogitated for a moment; then requested permission to use the telephone, and the inspector listened with mild amusement to the conversation that ensued between Miller and his connection. When the reporter dropped the receiver there seemed the shadow of exultant light in his eyes.

For Mr. Hugo Miller was again hot on his own trail.

"You said it," reminded the inspector. "Groover and Company, wasn't it? They carried Avery's insurance."

Miller nodded. "And what I learned was that the fire started in the secretary's—in Miss Watkins' room—next to Avery's—that is, as nearly as they can dope it out. And it was due probably to crossed electric wires."

"Well, that's their guess. They're entitled to it, seein' that they're paying the piper." The inspector attached little or no importance to the suppositions of the insurance people and he was scarcely prepared for Miller's next question.

"Got an electrician in the building?"

The inspector humphed his disgust. "Yeh," he admitted, and then, in the same tone that one would use to humor a very mild but pestilential lunatic: "Want to quiz him some?"

Miller expressed that this was his desire, and the inspector obligingly pushed a button on the desk before him. To the uniformed man who answered the summons, he nodded briefly: "If Jackson's in the building, send him in." And in a few minutes Jackson appeared.

"Y' wanted me, Chief?"

"Yes. Know Mr. Miller there, of the *Times-Union*."

Jackson bobbed his bullet-head in the general direction of Miller and remained eying the inspector, who continued: "You're by way of being a pretty decent electrician, ain't you?"

"Who, me?" Jackson wanted more information before he committed himself. The thought of possibly having to wire some portion of the inspector's office did not exactly jibe with his ideas of happiness. "Yeh—I'm fair; that is, I uster be."

"Well, see if you can answer some questions that Mr. Miller wants to ask;" the inspector nodded to Miller to proceed, and Jackson turned a somewhat stupid face in the direction of the reporter.

"All right; what's the big idea?"

Miller seemed embarrassed, but only for a moment. "A fire can start by crossed electric wire, can't it, Mr. Jackson?"

Jackson took in the question and then shot a look at the grinning inspector which seemed to say: "Who's the nut?" But he replied by a nod of his bullet-head: "I'll say it can."

"Well," continued Miller, "do you think, Mr. Jackson, that wires could be deliberately crossed to start a fire?"

"Of course they could. Could do it myself. Anybody could."

There was no vagueness about the detective's replies at any rate, and Miller seemed unaccountably pleased with the statement of the obvious fact.

"Well, do you think you could cross a wire in this office now so that the fire would break out at some specified time later?"

The Jacksonian intellect staggered under the complications this question involved. "Say that again, will you?"

Miller repeated the question: "Could you arrange to start a fire by crossing wires and fixing them so the fire wouldn't begin for, say an hour after you'd crossed the wires? Fix 'em with insulation, or something?" Miller was vague as to means.

The question, however, seemed worthy of Jackson's deepest consideration, and he let himself gently to the top of the inspector's desk in order to think it out at his ease. "Um, you mean could a guy set wires to pop at a certain time—sort of?" And Miller agreed that, though poorly stated, Mr. Jackson had admirably caught the intent of his question.

"No, I don't hardly think I could." Jackson's answer was the result of almost painful thought, and he felt the answer was worthy of repetition. "No—I don't hardly think so."

"Do you mean it couldn't be done at all, under any circumstances?" Miller was becoming somewhat skeptical of Jackson's electrical knowledge. As a matter of fact, the detective was quite a proficient electrician, even though the bovine expression

of his face indicated anything but a comprehensive grasp of the subject.

"Hold on a minute. I ain't sayin' it couldn't be done at all. Come to think about it, there ain't no reason why it couldn't, though I don't know as I could do it myself. Lessee"—and it was almost possible actually to watch the man thinking—"a sort of a timing switch—um—" He seemed interested in his own mental experiments. "By golly; if a man knew enough about it, I'm blamed if I don't think he could do it. I *know* he could."

The detective looked with more respect at Hugo Miller, respect engendered by the thought that here was a man who had thought of something original. And he was just a little put out when Miller did not continue, but turned to the inspector. "That's all I wanted to find out; thanks." And the inspector waved the detective from the room.

"Satisfied?" The inspector cut into Miller's musing.

"Almost," the young fellow nodded. "Almost. And I'm getting mighty warm on a trail you haven't even looked for."

The inspector patted the papers on the desk before him. "Oh, I don't know," he smiled. "I ain't done so bad, everything considered."

Miller drew his chair up confidentially. It was impossible to keep these results to himself, and he already began to plume himself visibly. "Every-

thing you've got on Lerner, I've got on my man," he began with certainty of his ground. "And then some."

"Yeh. What else?"

"I've got this on him: You heard what Jackson said about it being possible to fashion a device that would start the fire from an electric wire at a specified time, didn't you? Well, that's what I think my man did, for he wasn't at the house when the fire started." Miller seemed mentally checking over his very satisfying deductions.

"He had all the motive in the world," he continued rapidly, gaining confidence with each word. "All the motive any jury in the world would want, and, on the particular night of the murder, he was seeing red and gunning for Avery. Oh, I've got that straight all right! There's no doubt of it, and I can prove it. The night of the fire he was out to get Avery—anyway at all."

The inspector became slightly more intense in the regard he bestowed on the papers on his desk. This matter of motive was the one thing that weakened a well-nigh perfect case against Lerner. It would first be necessary to prove motive—he realized that, so he lost nothing of the reporter's summing up.

"Remember," Miller went on, "we can prove actuating motive on this man. We can also prove that, at various times, he had threatened Avery; also that he hated Avery and that Lucian Avery hated

him. And I know this: when he did arrive at the fire, and just before that, he was acting mighty queer. He didn't look entirely like an innocent young man, and he didn't act like one."

"Say, who are you talkin' about?" The inspector failed to conceal the expectancy in his voice.

"And furthermore," Miller went on deliberately; "furthermore, there's the arson we can hang on him. The man I'm talking about could have set that fire—set it without any trouble at all, for he's a mighty good electrical engineer."

The last words gave the clue to the suspect, and the inspector's hand went to his chin in a characteristic gesture, while Miller leaned back in his chair with a smile of triumph.

"You mean," the inspector muttered, "you mean Raymond MacDonald." And it was not a question.

CHAPTER XIX

SIFTING THEM OVER

THE inimitable Jackson trailed slowly after Raymond MacDonald who alighted from the street-car near Bay and Hogan Streets. Very casually the detective followed MacDonald as he walked north on Hogan to Forsythe Street and then turning down that busy thoroughfare, passed by the gray stone Post-Office Building, and finally entered the building which houses the Atlantic National Bank.

If there was one thing on which Jackson justly prided himself more than another, it was his ability to pick up a man and stick with him, through fair weather and foul; up-hill and down-dale; through rain and shine and light and darkness. The story was still being told at the Headquarters Building that, on one memorable occasion, Jackson had started after a fast launch with the only available other craft, which, unfortunately, happened to be a canoe. Of canoes and their handling the detective knew as much as he did of cuneiform inscriptions, which was exactly nothing, and a very wet but still undaunted officer of the law was haled from the waters of the St. John's River.

So, where a less persistent individual might have contented himself with the knowledge that the man he was trailing had entered a building to which there was but one exit, and might have waited at this sole exit for the quarry's reappearance, not so Detective Harry V. Jackson. Consequently he was in the little knot of men who, with MacDonald, crowded in one of the express elevators, and also close to that young man when he called "Fourteenth."

Had MacDonald been other than intensely occupied with the thought of his destination he would, perhaps, have noted the detective who watched carefully from an angle in the corridor as Raymond MacDonald entered a suite of offices, on the ground glass door of which was stenciled the legend: "Larkin and Heilner, Attorneys at Law."

But MacDonald did not perceive Jackson, and the latter, having satisfied himself by a five-minute wait in the corridor—and, thereby, aroused the suspicions of several ebony-hued elevator boys—that MacDonald evidently had business that would keep him some time in the offices of Larkin and Heilner, took a chance that was unusual for him and descended again to the street.

He crossed Forsythe Street with due regard for passing traffic, and not without throwing careful glances over his shoulder to make certain that MacDonald had not followed him from the building op-

posite; and then entered a restaurant which faced the Atlantic National Bank. Here it seemed that Mr. Jackson was not unknown, for his entrance called forth a mild greeting from a white-aproned man behind the counter, and, in a moment, Jackson had made known his immediate need for the use of a telephone.

Although the office of Inspector Herndon was but a short three blocks away, Jackson was taking no chances, and obeying his orders literally. They had been to pick up MacDonald and to stick with him, and he proposed to do it. Also he was following the inspector's instructions to stay in touch with Headquarters by telephone.

So Mr. Jackson stood close to the plate-glass window of the restaurant, whispering his information secretly into the transmitter, always keeping a careful eye on the entrance to the building across the street.

The inspector, sitting in his office, engaged in a conversation with Coleman Ranson, a conversation that seemed to lead nowhere, turned with relief to the telephone and received his subordinate's whispered report.

"All right," grunted the inspector. "Just stick to him and keep phoning me where you are. Something may turn up."

"Another report from the worthy Jackson?" Ranson yawned in his chair. "Really, you'll have

me believing pretty soon that poor Mac is mixed up in this thing somehow."

The inspector snorted his displeasure. "Well, who first had the idea that he was responsible for the telephoning?" he challenged, and Ranson, for the moment, subsided in his chair.

It was not for long, however. The reporter was too keenly interested in the progress, or, as he insisted the city editor had said, lack of progress in the case to remain long silent. The story had been given him to handle from the beginning and he was going to see it through, even though it virtually meant blackjacking the inspector with threats to secure what information the Department had for publication. And the inspector knew that his best play was the pacifying of the reporter with such bits of information as he cared to hand out. For one thing, these official bulletins would prevent the scribes of the *Times-Union* and the *Metropolis* from drawing their own conclusions and printing them; thus, perhaps, anticipating some of the inspector's own plans and stealing his thunder.

Particularly the inspector feared the misguided activities of Hugo Miller. That young man, carried away with the idea of his own tremendous ability, might at any moment overturn some of the inspector's carefully laid plans.

So he volunteered the information: "MacDonald went to see Larkin and Heilner."

"The lawyers in the Atlantic National Bank Building?" Ranson sat up.

"Yep—what's in that?"

"Maybe a lot that we don't guess," admitted the reporter grudgingly. "It's not unlikely that they sent for him. You knew they were Avery's attorneys, didn't you?"

"Lucian Avery's? No, I didn't know. They've never been mixed up in any of his deals, have they?"

"You just bet your life they haven't! When you get Max Larkin and Frank Heilner tangled into anything that isn't one hundred per cent. on the level you tell me, hear!" The reporter knew the firm by repute and the senior member of it personally.

Larkin and Heilner enjoyed what was, possibly, the highest reputation of any firm of a like nature below the Mason-Dixon Line. Primarily criminal lawyers, they had branched out into other lines as their uncanny string of victories in criminal defense had brought them before the notice of the public. It was said that Larkin and Heilner never undertook a criminal case that they did not win. And their record backed the assertion. It was further whispered, with more than a basis of truth, that the firm undertook no case in which it was not thoroughly convinced of the innocence of the accused, and had even been known to drop a client summarily when

his guilt had been established beyond peradventure of a doubt.

"Well, what do you reckon Avery's lawyers would want with MacDonald?" The inspector seemed interested in the possibility. The fact was that the inspector was becoming somewhat afraid of what might lie behind the consistent silence maintained by Harry Lerner, who was then being held, pending the preliminary examination.

Lerner's attitude was entirely too calm and certain, and the inspector began to have grave suspicions that he had, somehow, miscued. Lerner was awaiting the hearing without the slightest signs of perturbation, nor had he retained counsel. The inspector was far too shrewd a man to suppose for a moment that a lawyer of Lerner's ability would not take advantage of every single aid the law allowed him, and the fact that Harry Lerner had been definite in his refusal of counsel gave the inspector room for considerable thought. Lerner's attitude toward the inspector had been one of the tolerant interest that one displays in a child which one knows will bump its head painfully, but which refuses to listen to reason.

And so the inspector began more and more to pin his faith on the guilt of MacDonald. Not that he had, by any means, concluded that MacDonald was unquestionably guilty. He had not, for when Inspector Herndon arrived at that conclusion Ray-

mond MacDonald would instantly be put under arrest. What the inspector really hoped was that such additional information would suggest itself that he could conscientiously arrest the young man, and, once definitely held on a grave charge, he felt reasonably sure that MacDonald would break under the strain and either confess to the murder of Lucian Avery or point to the criminal. That the young man was, in some manner, definitely connected with the tragedy, the inspector now felt certain; hence his interest in MacDonald's visit to the attorneys.

Ranson seemed to think the matter over. He, too, was leaning more and more to the theory of MacDonald's guilt, although he did not admit it. The association with dogmatic Hugo Miller, however, was manifesting itself in his thoughts.

"Suppose I call Max Larkin and see if he'll talk?" Ranson threw out the suggestion speculatively, and the inspector snapped eagerly.

"You know Larkin, don't you? Then go to it."

He pushed his desk telephone to the reporter and Ranson paged through the directory. Within a few minutes he had his connection:

"Hello—Larkin and Heilner? I'd like to speak with Mr. Max Larkin, please."

There was a moment's wait, and then a pleasant voice came over the wire:

"Mr. Larkin speaking."

"Hello, Mr. Larkin; this is Coleman Ranson of the *Times-Union*. Remember me?...Thanks. I'm glad you do....Sure I'm after information. Can you give it to me?"

There was a laugh in the voice that replied. "If I can: but it depends entirely on what you want to know."

"Well, for one thing, I'd like to know if the details of Avery's will—you're handling it, aren't you?—are ready to be given out?"

"Perhaps."

"And," continued Ranson quickly, "whether you'll talk for publication concerning the Avery estate?"

"I might," replied the man of law; "just what features are you especially interested in?"

"Well, for one thing," Ranson was becoming eager, "I'd like to know who inherits?"

"That's easy," came the reply. "The sole heir—heiress, rather—is Mrs. Raymond MacDonald, who figures in the late Mr. Avery's will as Miss Clara Avery. Anything else?"

But the reporter had learned what he most desired to know. "I'd like to come up and talk with you, if it's convenient," he suggested. "At four o'clock....Thanks, I'll be there."

"At least," the reporter began, slowly turning from the instrument to the waiting inspector, "at

least there's no doubt but that MacDonald is going to benefit by Avery's death. His wife inherits."

A smile of certainty began to twist the inspector's mouth. "I'm getting warm," he muttered, "mighty warm."

Which was also true of Detective Jackson who, with the persistency of a plague, again picked up Raymond MacDonald when that young man emerged amazedly into the garish glare of Forsythe Street. But the trial led straight back to Springfield and to MacDonald's residence, and the surprised detective saw Raymond MacDonald run, as though in great haste, up the battered concrete walk that led to the house, which fact Jackson stowed carefully in his mind

Raymond MacDonald burst into the room where Doctor Lester sat, growling sundry instructions and dire threats to the Skipper. The old man was propped in a chair against the table, his face still swathed in bandages, but his blue eyes gleaming over the edge of the white linen.

Just prior to the entrance of his son the Skipper had been lamenting his inability and the doctor's cruel orders which prevented his working on a schooner that he was carving. The unfinished toy stood on the table, and the Skipper had nearly come to tears over the disappointment the delay was bringing to the five-year-old son of Inspector Herdon to whom the schooner had been long promised.

"Well, you look as though you had some news?" The doctor's greeting of Raymond MacDonald was in the nature of a question.

The younger man bounded across to the big physician whom he slapped joyously on the shoulder.

"I have, old sport, I sure have!"

The Skipper's eyes brightened. "What is it, sonny? Tell it."

And MacDonald blurted his great news in one breathless sentence.

"Clara inherits everything Avery had!"

"Wow!" The surprised bellow of the doctor echoed in the small room, and the Skipper raised his hands in a wide gesture while words sputtered vainly for utterance on his lips.

But the younger man did not wait. He turned to the staircase and took the steps three at a time. News like this was not to be kept a moment longer than was absolutely necessary, and the young man was hurrying to his wife.

"Sa—say," stuttered the Skipper, "ain't that great now? Ain't it—just!"

And the doctor opened his mouth to agree enthusiastically as Irma Watkins came flying down the steps.

"Did he tell you," she cried eagerly, "did Raymond tell you the news?"

The girl danced lightly to the Skipper's side and implanted a kiss on the old man's bandaged fore-

head. "Isn't it marvelous?" she breathed ecstatically. "Now you can have everything you want, Skipper—even your yacht to take Clara sailing on; just think of it!"

She turned radiantly to the doctor whose heavy face had slowly set again into its tired, haggard lines. He came slowly and clumsily to his feet. "Guess I'll have to move on." He avoided the girl's eyes, and she did not fail to note it. And it hurt. It seemed for a moment that tears would rise to the eyes that had, but that instant, gleamed with happiness. But the tears did not come, for the doctor, striving hard to make his departure seem casual and natural, had addressed a remark to the Skipper.

"I suppose you know that the inspector is holding Harry Lerner, don't you?"

"No!" The old man's ejaculations came thickly. "Have they any proofs on him?"

A side glance of the eyes had shown the doctor the girl's pale face. It might have been due, of course, to the doctor's sudden injection of the depressing theme into the temporary happy atmosphere. The doctor did not know.

"I think they've got a good case against him," he replied to the Skipper. "A mighty good case."

"I don't think they've got the right man, Lester—I sure don't." The Skipper shook his head slowly. "Do you, Irma?"

The girl's laugh was not pleasant. "I don't know.

How should I know? Oh, are we never to hear the end of this!"

Plainly the tragedy had had a greater effect on her nerves than she was willing to admit, and the doctor turned heavily to the door.

"*Adios*," he rumbled, addressing no one in particular; "see you later on."

The girl stood with both hands pressed tightly to her breast as she listened to the heavy footsteps dying away; then most unaccountably she threw herself on her knees beside the old man in the chair and buried her face in his lap, her shoulders shaking with her sobs.

The Skipper was embarrassed. Frightfully. He patted her shoulder and endeavored to comfort the girl clumsily.

"Don't cry, Irma. Don't break down, little girl. You've been braver than any of us."

The girl only sobbed louder and the Skipper blinked his eyes uneasily. His limited experience did not include weeping Niobes, and the old man was very much afraid that he, too, would in a moment be a sobbing example of what an old and honorably retired seaman should not be.

But, even if she had desired, Irma Watkins would have been at loss to explain her sudden, unreasoning hysteria. There was something in the doctor's attitude to her that was different. That much she had immediately realized, but had—for a

time—attributed it to the fact that the big man's mind was engaged keenly on the case of Lucian Avery. But when his strange, clumsily concealed coolness continued she had first wondered, then become piqued and finally fearful of what it might mean. Doctor Lester was so outspokenly straightforward and honest that the girl could not but realize that something vitally important lay behind the big man's change of manner.

And there *was* something important behind it. For the huge doctor moved slowly down the street, oblivious to the street-cars that clanged their way to the city. And it was not until he had lumbered a full mile that he became consciously aware of the fact that he *was* walking. His mind was full of the picture of the girl; he could not rid himself of her face, nor his consciousness of the words that Lucian Avery had spoken with his last breath.

Even after he had finally boarded a street-car for the city, and was once again making his familiar way to the office of Inspector Herndon, the same thoughts occupied him.

When he entered the office of the inspector and saw that individual in earnest conversation with Hugo Miller, he turned as though to leave again. But the inspector came quickly to his feet and urged the doctor to remain, so the big man sank into a chair silently. He did not like the dapper young

feature writer, so kept silent although he wanted to question the inspector on the progress of the case.

It was Miller who began it, however. The young man seemed especially anxious to secure the liking of the big physician, and he realized that, thus far, he had failed to appeal very much to him.

"Well, I've been doing a little detecting on my own account," he began lightly, addressing the doctor, but the hulking physician only raised his eyebrows in polite inquiry and did not reply.

"Yes," Miller went on conversationally; "I went out to the house—what's left of the house, I mean—and pottered around a while. The inspector didn't think much of my find—at first. Want to take a look at it?"

The doctor only nodded silently and absently, and the inspector pulled open a desk drawer while Miller walked around the doctor and stood between him and the desk as he spoke.

"Look at these," he invited, "and see what you make of 'em." He stood aside and indicated the two battered revolvers that the inspector had placed on his desk.

The doctor reached forward heavily and picked up one, holding the weapon close to his small eyes as he examined it.

"Looks pretty badly battered," he offered politely. "Due to the exploding cartridges probably."

Miller nodded. "But look at this one," he sug-

gested, passing over the other. "That's the gun in which I found one cartridge that wasn't exploded by heat but by the hammer."

The doctor took the weapon in his hand and passed back the one he held, with which Miller turned again to the desk.

So no one saw the sudden pallor which spread over the physician's face as he stared at the remains of the revolver in his hand, and when, a few moments later, the big man stumbled unsteadily into the street, neither of the two men he left behind him had the slightest suspicion of what the doctor knew.

But to Doctor Edward Lester had come the last link in the chain against Irma Watkins. The revolver that he had held in his hand was one that the girl could easily have secured; one that he had seen often in the home of Raymond MacDonald!

CHAPTER XX

A NEW LEAD

COLEMAN RANSON'S expert fingers dropped from the typewriter keys before him and fell idly into his lap while the cigarette, which was fast burning into the table beside the typewriter, went unheeded. The reporter had been typing his account of the developments in the Avery case, and he had stopped midway, gripped by a sudden, breath-taking thought. The cigarette burned to an ash and still Ranson made no move other than slightly to change position in the chair in which he sat.

Two or three times, in the interim, the city editor had glanced over at the back of Ranson, and had noted the reporter's unwonted lack of movement. Now he crossed the city room and addressed the man before the typewriter:

"Stuck?"

But Ranson did not appear to have heard and the city editor, reading over his shoulder from the typed sheet in Ranson's machine, saw:

"... and Inspector Herndon of the Local Department claims to have the case against Harry Lerner

absolutely air-tight. The preliminary hearing will be by Magistrate George Sanders some time to-day.

"Considerable interest attaches to the evidence that will be brought out at the hearing; evidence that will tend, we are reliably informed, to prove that there had been a violent quarrel between the late Lucian Avery and Harry Lerner, in the former's house only a day before the tragedy.

"For this new testimony the prosecuting attorney is indebted to a member of the *Times-Union* staff. Our representative, in going over the testimony adduced at the inquest realized at once that, with the usual lack of legal acumen that characterizes the gentleman, Coroner Straiton, who officiated, neglected to ask some very important questions.

"It has now been ascertained from the late Mr. Avery's secretary—Miss Irma Watkins——"

And here the reporter's story had ended. The city editor dropped a hand on Ranson's shoulder.

"Well, what's the trouble?"

Ranson jerked with startling suddenness from under the man's hand, then turned a blank face to the gaze of the city editor.

"Oh, it's you," he muttered inanely. "What did you ask me?"

The city editor grunted. "You've been sitting there for thirty minutes giving a life-like imitation of an immovable body," he commented.

"Have I?" The reporter put the needless question blankly. He seemed not yet quite awake from the trance into which he had fallen.

"Say, where'd you get it?" The city editor was elaborately sarcastic. "Didn't know there was any in town."

Ranson made no answer to this; instead he paged through the yellow sheets of typed paper on his table.

"We're on the wrong trail, Hal," he commented slowly. "We've all gone wrong."

"What's that?" The city editor displayed considerable interest in the remark. "How do you figure? Come on—come to life, will you? Spit it out."

He reached over to the telephone desk and pulled a chair beside the reporter's. "Now, what's up," he demanded. "Talk."

Ranson fumbled for a cigarette. "Of course I may be a thousand miles off," he began, "and I'm not saying I ought not be kicked for suggesting it, but there's a factor here that no one seems to have even considered." He spoke in a manner that seemed to indicate a sincere desire to be instantly convinced that he was wrong, and the hand with which he indicated the typewritten sheet in the machine was somewhat shaky.

The cigarette that the city editor was lifting to his lips remained poised: "All right; go on. I read all that. What's it lead to?"

Ranson shook his head and puffed nervously on his own cigarette. "This was one case in which I

thought from the beginning there would be no scandal; not for a second has any one even suggested——”

“By the lord, man!” The startled exclamation of the city editor gave evidence that the man’s keen mind had caught immediately the drift of the reporter’s words. He dropped his cigarette to the floor and whistled softly. “Irma Watkins!”

And Coleman Ranson nodded his head slowly. “Irma Watkins,” he repeated after the city editor.

The city editor gave a little gasp of astonishment as the thought began to take hold. He hitched his chair still nearer to that of the reporter’s, and glanced about to make certain that no one could overhear.

It would not do for the *Times-Union* to go off half-cocked. On the other hand, once the evidence was in hand nothing on earth could stop the city editor from spreading it through an extra edition. Once his sudden suspicions could be sustained, the news would flash through the city, and already in the back of his mind floated the vague nebulous story that would appear in hard, cold type.

Cherchez la femme! How utterly true and suggestive that injunction to seek the woman. Even here, where nothing visible had pointed in the direction of any one save one or two men, the startling adjuration came to mind.

"Remember my asking about her when that first call came in?"

And Ranson remembered. "Yes." His answer was monosyllabic and he added nothing to it.

"Remember that I said it looked queer to me; this living out there in the house—just the secretary and the man."

"And the housekeeper;" Ranson reminded again.

"Well? What do you think?" The city editor eyed Ranson closely, and the reporter shook his head in slow negation.

"I only mentioned it, Hal, because it wouldn't have been acting square with the paper not to have done it;" he admitted. "But it doesn't seem possible. You don't know the girl, do you?"

"No, but I've known others." The editor spoke out of the idol shattering experience of many years. "And——'the Colonel's Lady,' you know."

Ranson mopped his forehead. He suddenly felt that the city room was extremely stuffy, and one hand wandered aimlessly to his already loosened collar.

"Where did the girl say she was during the fire?" The city editor had started on his task, and Ranson knew the shrewd newspaper man too well not to realize that he would finish it.

"She was at MacDonald's house; that was her testimony at the inquest."

"Alone, wasn't she?"

"Except for Mrs. MacDonald, yes."

"Did you find out where Mrs. MacDonald was all the time the girl was there?"

"Yes; asleep in her own room."

The case began to assume startling proportions. It was simply impossible to remain blind to the possibilities of it.

"What was she doing?" The city editor began on a series of questions that, he felt certain, would disclose valuable details.

"She told me that she sat reading in an adjoining room. Sat there alone until they brought back the Skipper."

"How long before we learned of the fire was the girl at MacDonald's house?"

"About two hours, I believe, or thereabouts."

The city editor frowned thoughtfully. "Nobody else at the MacDonalds' house, was there?"

"No."

"Absolutely no one then who can actually prove that she *was* in the house."

"The Skipper. He was there when she arrived."

"And left immediately afterward, didn't he?"

Ranson nodded. There was only the girl's bare word that she had remained in the house after the Skipper had left it.

"Two hours, eh?" The editor speculated aloud. "Could she have gone from Springfield to Ortega and back again to Springfield before——" He

broke off his sentence, then: "By George! She could have!" He nodded decisively. "What it's up to us to do is to comb this town until we find some one who saw her, *after* the time she says she arrived at MacDonald's."

Ranson shook his head. "My theory was that she—that—well, that she did it *before* she went to MacDonald's house, and that the fire was, as the underwriters say, accidental."

The city editor bit his lip. "Um; I believe we're nearing it, Ranson. I believe we are. That would clear up the reason why Avery had made no effort to get out of the house. I think that's it. I'm mighty certain that that's the answer."

"I'm afraid that—I'm afraid— Oh, hell. It sounds straight." Ranson blurted the sentence.

"And I wouldn't have put it beyond Avery." The editor's tone was viciously certain. "The man that would frame up his own niece like he did would do anything."

Ranson was studying the keyboard of his typewriter. He made no answer.

In a minute the city editor broke out again: "The girl's room was next to Avery's, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Have a door between them, do you know?"

Ranson shook his head. "Don't believe there was one."

"Both opened on the same hall, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"It's a hell of a thing to accuse a dead man of, the Lord knows," the city editor muttered. "But, what can *we* do—we've got to face the facts when they're thrown at us. That's what we're here for. I'm sorry for the girl, though." He seemed to be trying to justify his own thoughts. "And if I'm blackening the memory of Lucian Avery—well, I can't smut it any worse than it already is."

He sat silent for a moment. "Tell you what you do," he ordered suddenly; "you hike out to see Doctor Lester at the hospital. . . now wait a minute, will you?" The last words as Ranson made a gesture that might have meant his disinclination to meet the physician.

"You go to see him; I don't want to send anybody else on this. Let's keep it dark until we're certain. Put the whole blamed thing up to him as it looks to us. He's the most intimate friend she's got, isn't he?"

"Intimate? Why, the man's crazy in love with her."

"What?"

"It's the truth; half the town knows it."

"And how about the girl?"

"That's what started me," he admitted reluctantly. "She hung on out there, and I know for a fact that the doctor's been trying to get her to leave Avery—learned it from the Skipper. The doctor was more

than likely afraid of exactly what seems to have happened."

"Has she ever refused Lester?"

"I don't know. Nobody seems to know. It was the old man's idea—the Skipper's, that is—that the girl stayed on at Avery's in the hope of being able to be useful to Raymond MacDonald and his wife. She's the sort that would do it, too, even though it meant the postponing of her own happiness. That's the hell of it!"

After a moment's silence the editor rose to his feet. "There's no use to balk at it, Ranson. We've got to do it, that's all. I know how you feel, but I can't let anybody else in at this stage of the game. I'd be scared it would leak." He looked down almost humanly at the reporter.

"This Lerner," he continued, "is going to wiggle out of it. I've suspected that all along, and I never believed he had the guts necessary for a thing like this. His silence is pretty conclusive to me that he knows a thing or two that will squash whatever Herndon thinks he's got against him. There's really nothing very definite, you know, except those phone calls and that rush into the house. If he can satisfactorily explain the calls, it will let him out, I think. I don't more than half believe that he had time to bump Avery off the few minutes he was in the house, and besides Maybeck tells me—he was in charge of the fighting of the fire above the first

floor—Maybeck says it wasn't humanly possible for any one to get up-stairs through the front way at the time Lerner ran in. You mark me: Avery was killed *before* the fire; that's my own opinion, regardless of who did it."

Ranson disagreed. The reporter favored the theory that the crime was committed after the fire, the murderer taking advantage of the fire to cover his crime. And until a solution of the mystery presented itself, there was no proof available to the contrary.

"At any rate," continued the city editor, "we know the girl was the last one that saw Avery alive, the last one who saw him before he was shot, that is; and that's important enough. You hustle out to the hospital and break it to the doc. That man's got something inside his skull, which is more than can be said of the Detective Department, and it wouldn't surprise me a whole heap if the idea of the girl had occurred to him before now."

And Ranson obeyed orders. He left the city room and the building and climbed thoughtfully into his automobile. On the way through Riverside he pondered the question. It was a hateful thing to dig up a possible scandal that would further besmirch the already unclean name of a dead man, and, worse yet, one that would leave indelible marks on the life of a young girl.

But the suspicion would not down, and, as be-

tween the girl and his paper, he regretfully realized that the paper came first. The city editor, he knew, would not hesitate to print even a damning story of his very best friend, provided, of course, the circumstances were such that the story was tremendous and exclusive news, and Ranson saw no way out. Even without any further confirmation than the suggestively incriminating circumstances that they already possessed knowledge of, it seemed that the story would have to be printed. The least he could do was to talk it over with Doctor Lester, although Ranson—who had known the big physician since his advent into the city of Jacksonville from Tulane University of New Orleans—was by no means certain that the doctor would listen.

The tang of the exquisite Florida autumn, the bright green grass, the vari-colored flowers that dotted Riverside Park, and the long expanse of clean clear road before him all went unnoticed. Where, ordinarily, the reporter might have rhapsodized, he now passed in silent unappreciation, and the man entered the Harris Hospital sick with the thought of his mission and half-determined to spare, somehow, the huge man who came forward to greet him.

Doctor Edward Lester made but few friends. His was not the nature that makes a multitude of chance acquaintances and glorifies them with the title of friends. The word, in the doctor's lexicon meant

more than mere acquaintanceship. With him a friendship was a thing to cherish, to make sacrifice for and to retain forever. On rare occasions, when the doctor could be drawn into a discussion of friendly relations, he first defined the word, and to him Plutarch's classic definition was a real thing, and his heavy face lit with a strange light when he quoted: "True and perfect friendship requires these three things: virtue, as being honest and commendable; society, which is pleasant and delectable, and profit, which is needful and necessary." And, if his listener was markedly sympathetic, he would add: "And, above all, the free giving of service; the willingness to be of use." And, almost invariably, as though ashamed of having allowed his feelings to gain mastery, even for a moment, of his scientific mind, he would clumsily turn the subject into other channels.

"Come in and give me the latest;" the doctor held open the door of his private office and Ranson entered.

When the cigarettes were burning evenly, the doctor brushed aside the litter on his flat desk, and leaned forward.

"Well, you didn't flivver all this way for a look at my handsome mug. What's under your hair, young man?"

Ranson was embarrassed. He could not meet the direct gaze of the doctor, and he fidgeted nervously.

"Came to get a confirmation," he began finally, "of a rumor that you and a certain young lady have agreed to try it together." The reporter felt that this was a happy opening, for the doctor's start of surprise was patently sincere.

"Who started that sort of talk, I'd like to know," grumbled the big man, but there was an undercurrent of pleasure in his voice. "Somebody with more time than brains, that's certain."

"Then there's nothing in it?" Ranson simulated disappointment.

"I didn't say there wasn't, did I?" The counter-question flattened Ranson. The affair had gone further than he had known.

"Then I suppose congratulations are in order."

But the doctor shook his large head. "Not quite just yet," he admitted ruefully. "But I hope they will be soon." This was followed by an elephantine sigh. "Lord, I hope so."

"Does that mean the lady put you off?"

"Not exactly," the doctor replied frankly. "It means—you wouldn't believe it, would you?—that I haven't had nerve to ask her yet."

"You never have?" Ranson's incredulity was laughable. "Why, man, half the town has had you two married a dozen times."

The doctor nodded. "I guess it has, and I sure wish that half the town had been right—at least once." He puffed on his cigarette. "You see, he

began again confidentially, "the little lady had some mighty good reasons, I think, for never encouraging me any too much. I'm not—well, I'm not exactly an Apollo Belvedere, you know."

"Stuff!" Ranson was scornful. "There's not an unmarried female in town that wouldn't grab you off if she had the chance."

"Aw—go on." That the doctor really enjoyed the honest flattery of Ranson was evident. "Who'd want to marry a hippopotamus?"

And Ranson joined in the doctor's rumbling laugh.

To the reporter it seemed, however, that there was something lacking. Somehow he sensed a difference in the doctor, and he studied the man as though to discover, if possible, some physical evidence of the impalpable change.

"About—about Miss Watkins——" Ranson began again in an uncertain tone.

"Huh! What's that?" The doctor dropped his cigarette into a tray, and his little eyes bored into the man across from him.

The reporter resolved to blurt the whole thing in one breath, and he plunged.

"Now don't jump, Lester," he warned, "but there are one or two things that aren't quite—er—clear to the—er—city editor about Miss Watkins'—er—relations with—with Avery."

Both the doctor's hands clenched tightly on the

arms of his chair, and a slow dark color suffused his face. "Just a minute, Ranson." The warning dropped from the doctor's lips harshly. "Just what are you driving at?"

Ranson turned a brick red. "Lester, you know damned well that *I* don't mean anything. Now don't you?"

The big doctor did not reply for a moment but his eyes blazed squarely into Ranson's and the grip of his hands relaxed slightly. What he saw in the wide eyes of Coleman Ranson seemed to satisfy him, for he muttered heavily. "All right, Ran; excuse me, boy. Go ahead."

"Well," Ranson cast about for the proper words. "It's—it's—oh—*cherchez la femme*, you know. The paper suspects that Miss Watkins may know more than she says she does about the murder of Lucian Avery."

The thing was out, and the reporter felt the tremendous relief that comes only with the sloughing off of an actual, almost unbearable burden.

But, no matter what his thoughts had been as to how the doctor would take the actual suggestion itself, once he came to it, Ranson did not expect the awful and complete silence that followed his words. The big doctor sat slumped forward in his chair; his mouth was slightly open and his eyes had the startled expression of one who has been suddenly struck a crushing physical blow.

CHAPTER XXI

ARREST

IF your honor will permit, I should like to make a statement in answer to the charges brought against me by the gentleman acting for the state." Harry Lerner's eyes met those of the magistrate squarely, and, after but a second's consideration, the magistrate nodded.

"Your statement will not be under oath, sir, and anything that you may say will be used against you."

Lerner bowed gravely to show that he understood. The man's bearing was strangely at variance with the front that Harry Lerner was accustomed to show to the city of Jacksonville. It seemed that the black charges against him had lent an air of seriousness—of vague dignity—to the man. The inspector's thought had been correctly voiced. Lerner did not look like a murderer.

The preliminary hearing of the attorney was nearing its close and Inspector Herndon, called as witness for the state, had given his testimony in rather a heartless fashion.

The inspector realized, as did also the prosecutor, that, if Lerner's explanation of his telephone calls and reason for dashing into the burning house were only clear and bore the stamp of verity, there was little chance that the man could be held for the murder of Lucian Avery. As for the charge of arson: the newspaper publication of the opinions of the experts employed by the insurance agency had already squashed the possibilities that lay in that direction.

The testimony which the prosecutor had lately come to count on particularly, that of Irma Watkins, had not been so telling as he had expected it would be. The girl's evidence was based entirely on the things that she had overheard as she sat in the study of the Avery home while Lerner was in conversation with Lucian Avery in the library.

She said that she had recognized the voice of Lerner, but qualified her statement immediately with the information that she could have been mistaken. She seemed quite sure that it had been Lerner who had been with Lucian Avery, yet, confronted with the necessity of taking oath to the fact, she found herself unable to do so, not having actually seen the man.

Even granting that it was Lerner who had been in the library with Avery, the quarrel—if it could be called that—appeared of little consequence.

The girl testified simply that she had heard Avery

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directing Lerner to secure from Clara MacDonald the land that she owned in the proposed subdivision of Averyville or Averytown—at that time the name had not been definitely decided on and the girl had heard both words used. And, as nearly as she could recall them she quoted the lawyer's words to Lucian Avery. She was positive that Avery had made no reply to the lawyer's outburst, and it was not difficult to see that the man's objection to complying with Avery's orders had made a favorable impression on the examining magistrate.

And the testimony of the secretary stopped there. She had heard only the sudden low words of Lerner agreeing to carry out Avery's orders as originally laid down.

The prosecuting attorney saw at once that capital could be made by the accused of the girl's testimony that she had heard nothing from Lucian Avery after the man's objection to the plan of purchasing the land. He saw immediately that the accused could even claim that he had been physically threatened by the promoter, and he was shrewd enough to know that the trained mind of Harry Lerner did not overlook the point.

Although not a criminal lawyer, in the strictest interpretation of the words, Lerner's legal experience had been long and varied, and the very fact that he had retained no counsel to defend him spoke of his confidence.

Before even the accused requested permission of the court to make a statement, the prosecutor had expected some such move. And he knew that the magistrate's decision would be influenced largely by what Lerner would say and the manner in which he said it.

Harry Lerner was not unknown to the attorney for the state, and the very fact that the lawyer had sat calmly through the recitals of the witnesses, making not even one note, nor once exercising his privilege to cross-examine—as attorney for himself—convinced the prosecutor that, at least, Lerner felt confidence in his own ability to clear himself.

Such confidence is not without its subtle psychological effect, and, when Harry Lerner bowed respectfully in acknowledgment of the magistrate's permission for him to speak, the prosecuting attorney leaned back in his chair and turned an interested face to the speaker.

Lerner addressed his entire attention to the magistrate. He fully realized the gravity of his position, and he knew that, once released from custody, it would be very unlikely that he would again be held for the charge of killing Lucian Avery. Not that such a contingency was impossible; he knew that it was possible, but extremely unlikely.

"Your Honor," he began slowly, "it is now four years since I became known in the city as an 'Avery man,' and became known—to those who were in

position to see the workings of the gigantic Avery machine—as an Avery tool.

“It is not my intention to burden your honor with a recital of the multitude of reasons that led up to this fact, but it is necessary that I tell you, in a general way, how it came about. The choice was not mine. I was not a free agent. And, from the very beginning, I had no more chance of escaping the opprobrium that attaches to me than I had of killing Lucian Avery.”

Lerner stopped as though to array certain thoughts consecutively in his mind, and the prosecuting attorney admitted to himself that the beginning of the man’s defense sounded even better than he had feared it would. The last sentence, the attorney for the state realized, was particularly effective; less for what it actually said than for the potentialities the words seemed to contain.

From high above the head of the presiding magistrate a stream of soft light illuminated the earnest face of the speaker, and brought into sharp relief each angle of the man’s face.

And Lerner continued to speak slowly and carefully: “When Lucian Avery secured control of the West Coast Central Railway four years ago, he found himself in a position that was threatening to ruin him. For a time it seemed impossible that the whole wretched scandal would not come before the public at once. And, during this time, Lucian

Avery realized that it was essential that he have some one—preferably some one with legal training and an elastic code of ethics—on whom to throw the brunt of the blame when the great break came. It is perhaps unwise to go into the sordid details of the manipulation. Your honor knows of it. Lucian Avery found his man. I am he.”

The magistrate’s lips tightened slightly, and the deliberate strokes he was making on the blotter before him became less regular.

The prosecuting attorney gazed speculatively at the magistrate. Was it possible that the magistrate did really know the inner conditions of the West Coast Central deal? If so, then Lerner’s case was trebly strong, for the prosecutor groped in the dark—as did all but a very few—when it came to a discussion of the sudden and complete manner in which Lucian Avery had come into control of the West Coast Central.

“Lucian Avery came to me at a time, Your Honor, when all the attending circumstances seemed to conspire to force me into a path that I had hitherto never dreamed of considering; the path that leads from the unethical practise of a noble profession to—well, to even the accusation of guilt of a murder.”

The prosecuting attorney half turned to his assistant; then his eyes traveled about the empty room and came to rest, finally, on the magistrate. Lerner’s voice was low pitched and intense in its sincer-

ity, and the straight shaft of soft light beamed steadily on his features.

The prosecutor felt, vaguely, that it was a pity that what promised to be a masterly example of pleading should go unheard save by the three men present.

The magistrate seemed calm and detached as he waited patiently for the speaker to continue. To the strange eye, Magistrate Sanders would have given the impression of being occupied with thoughts a thousand miles removed from the case under consideration. He seemed so utterly unconscious of his position, and gave so little evidence of listening, that it was hard to believe that this was the man of whom it was said that never a point—never the slightest inflection of a voice—was lost upon him.

That Harry Lerner was paving the way for a confession of his misdemeanor was plainly evident to the prosecutor and he looked suggestively at his assistant, for, if Lerner intended to wipe the slate clean with one sweep, the wiping would at least prove interesting.

"Lucian Avery came to me at a time when it was necessary—when it was absolutely essential—that I have a large sum of money. If the court desires to know why this money was needed, I can give even that information—although I earnestly hope that it will not be necessary."

A slight shake of the magistrate's head indicated

that he had heard, although from his attitude the fact would hardly have been believed.

"Your Honor, consider for a moment the position of a man not greatly gifted by nature, a failure in his chosen profession, young, ambitious, passionately desirous of making his way, earnestly striving for unattainable goals and failing constantly and miserably. Consider also a sudden grave need. A need that demanded for its satisfaction more money than this young man had ever before possessed.

"If it is possible for you to envision this picture, then conceive this man, reaching in his despair, for any manner—for any method, howsoever unpleasant and distasteful—to alleviate his condition.

"And to Lucian Avery, Your Honor, it was given to seek out this man. A malevolent fate guided them both. Lucian Avery laid before this man a check for one hundred thousand dollars."

Again Lerner broke off abruptly in his speech, and the magistrate slightly changed position in his chair, still, seemingly, inattentive. There was no questioning the effectiveness of the lawyer's low tone. And his words carried the unmistakable stamp of truth.

"What Avery needed was a man, as I have said, of legal training and an elastic conscience. The former I had, and the latter—I acquired.

"The threatening cataclysm of the West Coast Central was averted for the time. And, though it

has since threatened, never again was the danger so imminent; the defense so utterly unprepared to cope with the catastrophe as it would have been had the horror eventuated at that time. But, living in the shadow of the menace that had lifted only with the death of Lucian Avery, I earned that hundred thousand dollars; earned it one hundred thousand times over in anguish and mental pain.

"I still have that check, Your Honor. Lucian Avery presented it to me, and my signature, scrawled across the back of it is the one constant reminder of the depth to which I sank at that time.

"And tragic as it sounds, my need for the money passed with my receipt of it. My thirty pieces of silver—the silver for which I had sold the birth-right of an honorable name and the right to practise an honorable profession—turned valueless in my hands.

"Lucian Avery thought, when I asked the check of him, that I was attempting to destroy what evidence there was of my culpability. And he demanded that I write for him a full acknowledgment, in which I took upon my own shoulders the full responsibility for the West Coast Central negotiation. It was not wise to object. I had not yet become caloused to the opinion of my friends—of my colleagues, and Avery hinted that, unless he received such an acknowledgment, it was possible that some one less interested in my welfare than he might

stumble upon sufficient evidence to disbar me from the practise of my profession. I signed."

The prosecuting attorney was learning a great deal concerning the hammer-like effectiveness of a softly modulated speaking voice. Not once had Lerner's tone risen above the low note which began it. His words were almost unaccented. He made no gestures. The sentences—now long, now short—fell quietly from his lips. Even the most startling of them were spoken slowly and conversationally, and the attorney for the state was at loss to account for the fact that they gripped hard, and thundered straight into the mind. And then he realized that behind these soft sentences lay the personality of a man; that the sentences were freighted with truth—with outspoken honesty and with utter sincerity.

"It is no easy thing," the speaker went on, "for me to stand before you and say to you that I am—that my practises and actions have made me unfit to be associated with honorable men in the practise of an honorable profession. Yet, in the graver charge that is brought against me—a charge that is more vital even than the question of my integrity—I have no choice.

"From that time on I became an 'Avery man.' My desire for wealth, physical wealth, disappeared. My hopes and my dreams vanished utterly, but I kept on. I *had* to keep on.

"There were no more juggleries such as was the case of the West Coast Central, but the petty thieveries, the little daily abominable practises that I was compelled to agree to served to make my life in this city unbearable.

"But I had no choice. To leave the city and begin anew elsewhere was as impossible as to break the chains that bound me to Lucian Avery.

"Just before the matter of which your honor has knowledge: before the final flotations of the plans for Averytown, I foresaw what was coming.

"The purchasing of those tracts of lands that composed the developments that Avery had been engaged in had been accomplished by others. But I knew that, for this new project, I was to be chiefly accountable for the securing of such parcels as Avery demanded.

"I rebelled. For days I planned for some way to escape from the noose in which I stood. And then I conceived the idea of threatening the life of Lucian Avery. It was then that I planned the telephone calls. I resolved to make them always a little more threatening; always a little more in the nature of a warning. And that is why I wrote the note that I placed on Inspector Herndon's desk. I wrote it in Lucian Avery's house, during his absence, intending first to leave it among his papers.

"And, despite the calmness with which Avery took the telephoned inquiries, I knew that he had

begun to fear. He suspected his own secretary of being the originator of the calls, but he did not suspect me. One never suspects the worm until——”

The sentence was left unfinished, and the magistrate was again drawing aimless lines on the pad before him, while the prosecuting attorney was posed in a position that indicated his keen interest.

“I can scarcely explain just exactly what sort of reaction I expected from Lucian Avery to these threats. I know that I intended to frighten him. If he would leave the city, even for a short time, I felt that there was some hope of securing the paper which I have mentioned.

“I had no plans—no definite plans—yet I had fully determined not to stop at burglary. I knew that Avery’s vault in his Ortega home contained the statement, the possession of which meant to me the possibility of rehabilitating myself; the statement that meant clean honest living. And I resolved to steal it. Long since I had destroyed every shred of evidence that could be brought against me in the case of the West Coast Central. There remained only my own signed acknowledgment of the action.

“But then came the matter of the project of Averytown, in which, as your honor has learned, I was commissioned to secure some property from Mrs. Raymond MacDonald. Your honor has also heard the manner in which I took this final commission of Lucian Avery’s.

"It was not given me casually, Your Honor. When Lucian Avery suggested it there was the certain knowledge in his brain that I would suffer—suffer as much even as the woman he was planning to—to——"

The man stopped suddenly. With the injection of the name of Clara MacDonald into the speech the prosecuting attorney had looked for unexpected developments. He was not alone in the knowledge that rumor had more than once connected the names of Harry Lerner and Lucian Avery's niece before her marriage to Raymond MacDonald. But, on the whole, the prosecutor was disappointed.

"One does not willingly rob the woman one loves." For the first time a tense note crept into the man's voice and it seemed that his emotion would overcome his heretofore iron restraint. But he continued steadily:

"However unworthy a man may have been; however unworthy he may be, his love—his honest love for an honest woman stands forever as a pillar of light illuminating that tiny speck that forever remains of his better nature."

The magistrate sank still farther into his large chair, and the pencil with which he toyed dropped from his hands. For once it almost seemed that he was actually listening to the man before him.

"When I refused to obey Avery's commands, he did not threaten. He had done that too often for it

to be necessary. But he looked in the direction of the library vault, and he knew that I would not misinterpret that glance. And, once again, I fell.

"And after that time I did not again see Lucian Avery."

The man stopped with the words of that last sentence echoing in the minds of his listeners. He gave them time completely to grasp the meaning of the words before he continued:

"And when, on the evening of the catastrophe, I stood before the burning house of Lucian Avery, I realized that my last hope of securing that which I desired lay in the possibility that Avery, following his usual custom, had been at work in the library, and that, in the excitement of the fire, the vault had been left open. I thought that, perhaps, Lucian Avery had gone from the library to his own room or to another part of the house, and I hoped that I could secure the envelope in which he had sealed my acknowledgment. I heard that Avery had not come from the house. And that is why I risked a great deal that evening. The vault I knew was impervious to flames. Without thinking of what might transpire later I dashed into the house. The library was empty. The vault was closed."

The tense expectancy to which the speaker had raised his listeners was suddenly crushed with the last sentence, and the attorney for the state felt an almost acute regret.

"On the morning of the day of the fire, Your Honor, knowing that my plans for frightening Lucian Avery from the city, even for a brief time, could not materialize I had become desperate. I went to the firm of Larkin and Heilner. I had resolved to cut loose from Avery—the burden had become unbearable. Max Larkin and I had been classmates at one time. Only this accounts for the fact that he was willing to listen to me. I told him the whole wretchedly sordid story.

"And that is all, Your Honor, save only for this fact: I entered the offices of Larkin and Heilner at ten o'clock on the morning of the tragedy. I lunched with Mr. Larkin himself, was with him the entire afternoon in his offices planning what I hoped would be, with his aid, a new career, and he dropped me from his automobile before the drug store in Springfield from which I was followed by a member of the *Times-Union* staff."

Lerner turned wearily aside. He had shot his bolt. The matter rested with the silent magistrate.

The prosecuting attorney was ostentatiously regarding his finger-nails when Lerner turned in his direction. The bringing into the case of the law firm mentioned by Lerner ended what slight hopes the prosecuting attorney might still have entertained after Lerner's plea. The alibi of Harry Lerner was perfect. The word of the senior member of the firm of Larkin and Heilner was not to be

doubted for a moment, and, even should the case come to trial and the defense was undertaken—as doubtless it would be under the circumstances—by the firm mentioned, the attorney for the state knew how slight his chances were.

He knew when he was beaten, and he awaited the discharging decision of the magistrate with little regret.

And Inspector Herndon, sitting in his office and chewing a huge black cigar, also awaited the magistrate's decision. And when, in the course of half an hour, it did not come, the inspector became more and more certain that, for the time at least, the case against Harry Lerner had gone a-glimmering.

But it was not the inspector's intention to be caught empty-handed. There were other strings to his bow, however reluctant he might be to make use of them.

A spatulate thumb jammed viciously into the buzzer on his desk, and, to the man who answered the summons, the inspector turned quickly:

"Send me Nagel," he demanded.

In a moment Detective Nagel entered the room and stood awaiting his chief's pleasure.

For a time it seemed as though the inspector had forgotten that he had sent for the detective, and Nagel remained impatiently shuffling his feet and wondering if it would be wise to apprise the inspector of his presence by a discreet word.

Finally, however, the man at the desk threw his cigar aside. The action was indicative of his mental state. Inspector Herndon had come to a conclusion.

And Detective Nagel, a second Jackson for stolidity of expression, listened without the blink of an eyelid.

"I want you to chase up Jackson," the inspector ordered. "You'll find him on Raymond MacDonald's trail somewhere. Try Springfield first—Walnut Street. And you and Jackson bring MacDonald here."

The plain clothes man nodded. "Want it an arrest or—"

"Arrest!" The inspector shot out the word.

"On the charge of—"

"The murder of Lucian Avery!"

CHAPTER XXII

CONFESSION

THE actual crystallization into awful and imminent action of the doctor's gravest fears acted with stunning intensity on the big man's mind. He had, somehow, managed to struggle through the conversation with the reporter—just how he was never quite certain. The keen brain behind the shrewd little eyes had suddenly seemed to stop functioning. He was conscious only of a tremendous pain; the pain of a dead, immovable weight that pressed upon his every nerve, utterly paralyzing him.

Only one thought rose from the chaos. The reporter had not suspected that Lucian Avery had not died silent and when, after the deadening shock, he had begun to react, the weary man considered again with some degree of clearness, the thought that he would, of necessity, be compelled to tell of Avery's last words.

But there was no way out. The reporter had agreed to remain silent for a time. He had been forced to agree, for, as the city editor had already

said, the paper could do nothing definite until some actual, physical proof—other than the damning deductions from the apparent facts—became available. And it was just this actual proof—this last necessary straw—that the big man possessed in the knowledge of Lucian Avery's last words. The heavy face twitched spasmodically as the doctor fought with himself. His plain duty was to go to the office of Inspector Herndon, or even to the newspaper itself, with the story of what he knew. He did not shirk the fact, but for the first time in his career the Gargantuan physician hesitated when the path was straight and narrow.

What might have eventuated at that time was postponed. To the doctor there came the request, transmitted through the police sergeant on duty at Headquarters, from Inspector Herndon that the big physician come immediately to the inspector's office.

The shock of the request, and the cryptic manner in which it had been transmitted, startled the man less than might have been expected. It was even possible that the feeling of dread that hung over him was lessened by the thought of the probability that the matter was to be taken definitely from his hands. And, deep in the man, was the certain knowledge that—when the absolutely unquestioned time came for him to tell what he knew—he would speak; he would speak even if his words shattered

utterly the dreams and the fabric of which he had woven his greatest hope and ambition.

The big man commandeered one of the hospital's emergency ambulances for the trip to the city. He felt that the comparatively slow moving street-cars would be unbearable, and he could not contemplate the time that lay between him and what the inspector had to say.

The speed of the powerful ambulance as it whirled through Ortega, then Riverside, then the city itself was terrific, but the big man made no movement in his seat beside the driver to indicate that he was aware of it. Even when the huge, white hospital ambulance careened eerily as it slewed from the concrete viaduct of Broad Street sharply into the short curve into Bay Street, he made no movement to brace himself for the physical shock that seemed inevitable, and, when the rushing vehicle righted itself, and continued its clanging rush through the center of the city, even the driver's audible sigh of relief made no impression on the doctor.

A steel band seemed to compress his great chest: a taut crushing band that was engendered by his great emotion, as he entered the office of Inspector Herndon, and the police official, noting the signs of the strain under which the doctor labored, came immediately to the point of his request.

"I'm going to arrest Raymond MacDonald!"

A gasp of astonishment indicated that the doctor had fully understood.

"You're—you're arresting Raymond? What—what for?" The question was largely mechanical; the shock of the information that the inspector had called him to speak of a subject other than Irma Watkins was more than the big man could recover from in the instant.

"For the murder of Lucian Avery."

The inspector's words had a brittle unpleasing sound, and, as the doctor gazed blankly, the inspector explained:

"Lerner was released at the preliminary hearing. He explained a heap; just what I don't know yet, but I was about certain anyhow that there'd be no holdin' him."

The doctor only nodded for the man to continue. The still startled physician was trying to get some semblance of order into his thoughts, but the usually keen and logical brain refused to follow the lines he laid down for it. The effort which he exerted was physically manifested in the corded veins that stood out on his large forehead. And then across his thoughts leaped a sudden knowledge. The revolver that even then reposed in the inspector's desk, one cartridge of which had been fired, belonged in the house of Raymond MacDonald. Did the inspector know it? The physician was certain

that he did, and that the fact had caused the arrest of the young engineer.

"What I wanted to ask you to do," continued the inspector, "is to go out there, if you don't mind, and sort of be with the old man when he hears about it." There was an undertone of sympathy in the inspector's voice that was rarely present; certainly never on the occasions of his professional duty. "There wasn't no way out of it," he defended, "and there's no doubt about the kid's guilt. Why, he's the only one it *could* have been."

The doctor shook his head negatively, but the inspector did not wait for an interruption.

"I ain't sayin'," he added, "that the boy won't be able to get out of it. There ain't a jury to be got in this town that would convict him of worse'n manslaughter, even if he pleaded guilty, and that's what I want you to get the old man to have him do."

The doctor stared stupidly. "What—what made you suspect Raymond?" he finally questioned.

"Well," the inspector leaned back, "it wasn't what you'd call very hard. Sort of what the books call this elimination business. We've known all the time just how Avery and young MacDonald stood, and we know just what right MacDonald had—from his own point of view—to hate the man. And I ain't sayin' I wouldn't have done the same thing in his place."

The doctor's bent head seemed to indicate that he, too, might have done the same.

"And on this particular night," continued the inspector, "young Mac left the house with the confessed intention of gettin' Avery. He had plenty of reason—plenty.

"Just what he did ain't exactly clear yet, but here's how it looks: He went to Avery's house, and he went heeled. The kid was seein' red. Then came an argument. Of course, I'm just guessing at the details, but I'll gamble that I'm guessin' right. Avery wasn't the man to let anybody stand up and talk to him like MacDonald no doubt talked. And this was a case where the boy had Lucian Avery dead to rights. You know about how Avery did his own niece out of that land down Atlantic Beach way, don't you?"

But the doctor did not reply, and the inspector assumed that he did know.

"And from the argument," went on Inspector Herndon, "from the argument came the fight. It had almost happened before, you know,—a fight, I mean. There's no doubt that the scrap did come this time: that's how I account for the broken shoulder."

The doctor lifted his head at this and again he shook it slowly.

But the police official was not to be denied. "Avery was a better man, physically, than young

Mac. We know that, and it wouldn't be surprisin' if Avery was gettin' the best of it. And, well—then young Mac just made good some of his threats and sort of evened things up, that's all."

"And the fire?" The doctor interjected the question hopelessly. He knew beforehand that the case of the fire was, doubtless, made out with equal clearness against Raymond MacDonald.

"The fire's what cinches it. The insurance folks say it was started by electric wires. It's my idea that, after givin' Avery what he deserved and got, the boy got scared. He had to cover it up somehow, for there wasn't much doubt that the thing would be traced to him. So he got the idea of burnin' the place down.

"Remember, he's a damned good electrician. He set the wires and beat it. Then he hustled to the *T-U* building and got with Ranson, tellin' him all about the dirty trick Avery had pulled. That was his alibi; gettin' with Ranson that way. But he gave himself away. He was too nervous; too excited."

"Just a second," interrupted the doctor. He seemed to have become calmer during the inspector's speech, and now his voice was again dull and heavy. "The boy had just learned about the sale of his wife's property, remember; that is, he had just learned exactly what that sale meant to him. And I know better than you do just what it

did mean to him and to his wife. That was enough to cause any unusual excitement he might have shown."

"Maybe," agreed the inspector, "maybe it was, but that's what I doubt. You know the kind of temper the boy's got: I've heard enough about it. How he flies off the handle like a streak. He ain't the kind, I don't think, that'll mull over a thing like this. What he would do, first off, is to rush to the man who was responsible—now wouldn't he? And what I want him to do is to admit it—admit the whole thing. For, and I want you to tell the Skipper I said so, there ain't a jury in the state of Florida that won't believe that Lucian Avery didn't get exactly what was comin' to him sooner or later. And, by God! I'm one that's glad he got it."

The doctor wondered if he saw here a way out. It would be easy to let the case of Raymond MacDonald come to trial and to remain silent himself. The big man knew that the inspector was right. The death of Lucian Avery, while it had shocked the city, had not been very sincerely mourned, and the inspector was not the only one who expressed a grim satisfaction at the end that had been brought to the career of Lucian Avery.

But across the doctor's mental vision there drifted the pictures of Clara MacDonald and the Skipper. The woman would never stand the additional shock. The doctor knew it. And the Skip-

per! The doctor's hands opened and closed spasmodically. Here was the way out for the girl he loved. But the cost. The consequences of MacDonald's arrest would be fearful, even if the case ended with the acquittal of the young man.

"Now they're all friends of yours," the inspector's voice cut into the doctor's thoughts, "and as their best friend I sort of thought you'd——"

The doctor did not hear the conclusion of the sentence. Friends, that was it. The MacDonalds were his friends. He had often said so. And Irma Watkins, too, was a friend—or was she even more than that?

Friends. The simple word opened up before the man a vista of incalculable possibilities, and he closed his eyes tightly to shut out the picture: a picture of Clara MacDonald with arms extended pleadingly to him, behind her the trembling figure of the old sailor, the lines of pain deeply engraved into his wrinkled face. These were his friends.

"But—but they found Avery in his bedroom." The doctor's voice was low. "How do you account for that?"

The inspector shrugged. "I've got enough on the boy without worrying about that. That's the prosecutor's business, and even he ain't goin' to be any too keen to get a conviction where there ain't a single soul in town howling for one. Besides, I'm

morally certain the kid'll come through with the whole story."

The door of the office opened to admit Hugo Miller. He nodded a cheerful greeting to the two men.

"Just saw couple of your sleuths bringing in MacDonald," he offered. "I'm positive you've got the right man this time. You should have seen his face. One look at his face was enough."

The doctor stared coldly at the jubilant reporter, and the inspector's eyes flashed: "And maybe you'd be calm and collected if you were grabbed for murder and arson," he growled. "That's what's the matter with your breed of man. You celebrate because some other poor devil has been pinched for an act that ought to be considered charity. Like scotchin' a rattlesnake."

The doctor rose to his feet and Miller dropped into a chair beside the desk. He had been utterly taken back at the inspector's vehemence, but he soon recovered. He was patting himself pridefully on the back for his perspicuity and great show of ability.

"Let's see those guns again, will you, Mr. Inspector?"

The doctor stopped dead in his tracks and watched with fascinated eyes as the inspector surlily dumped the requested weapons from his desk

drawer. Then he, too, rose and turned to the physician, entirely ignoring the feature writer.

"Do you want to talk to—" he began slowly, but a startling interruption ended the question.

The door of the office burst open and there rushed into the room a small figure of a man, presenting a face half swathed in white bandages.

For a moment after his entrance he was unable to speak, breathing with difficulty and staring with wide-open, wild blue eyes at the inspector.

The doctor hurried clumsily around the inspector's desk. "All right, Skipper," he rumbled. "Don't get ex—don't be excited, old scout. There's nothing to it. Everything's coming out all right. You hear me?"

Miller withdrew to one corner of the small room, and the inspector dropped back into his chair, gazing steadily at the old man as though silently trying to assure him that the doctor had spoken the truth and that he—as inspector—had done only what he had to do.

Then the old man gasped: "What—what do you want with my boy? Why did those men make Raymond come here? Where is he? What have you done to him?"

The doctor continued to pat the slender shoulders of the man encouragingly, and, for once, the inspector—in the face of the Skipper's gleaming eyes—was at loss for words.

It was Hugo Miller's voice that cut into the silence: a silence broken only by the rasping breathing of the old man. "Your son has been arrested for the murder of Lucian Avery!" It was brutal, but necessary.

For a split second it seemed that the old man was going to collapse, but the doctor supported him with one brawny arm.

The Skipper slowly straightened. He breathed less heavily as he moved away from the support of the big doctor. "He didn't," came slowly from his lips. "I *know* he didn't do it." The blue eyes darted from one to the other of the three men as though challenging a question.

"How do you know?" It was again the reporter who accepted the challenge. Miller felt that this was his case, and that it was up to him to save it from the chicken-hearted police official who seemed on the verge of ruining it.

"How do *I* know?" The little old man drew himself erect. "I'll tell you how I know. I'll tell you. I know because *I did it myself!*"

The words came in almost an hysterical shriek, and he turned immediately to the inspector.

"Now you'll let him go, won't you, Herndon? You can't keep him now. You ain't goin' to put him in jail after this, are you? I did it. I'm guilty. I killed Avery and—and—and I burned down his house. That's the truth, Herndon; s' help me, it's

the truth. All of it. You're going to let Ray go home now, ain't you?"

The doctor reached out clumsily. "All right," he muttered, "all right, Captain. Don't take it like that. Of course they're going to let Raymond go. After a little he'll be right at home with you and —"

"But I did it! I killed him." The little Skipper's eyes blazed wildly. "Don't you believe I did it?" His eyes flashed about the room. "You don't believe I did it?"

The inspector shook his head slowly, and Miller followed his lead. It would make a dandy story. *"Father Endeavors To Shield Son! Confesses to Crime of Which He Is Innocent!"* In his mind's eye he already saw the full page lay-out.

But the eager little man darted to the inspector's desk and picked up one of the revolvers that the inspector had dumped there at the request of the reporter. The first he dropped again, then picked up the other. In a moment he held it up triumphantly:

"I'll prove it," he cried. "I'll *make* you believe me. This is *my* gun!" There was an exultancy in the cracked tone. "There's another one like it at home; I had a brace of 'em. *This* is what I killed Avery with."

He brandished the battered revolver in the inspector's face, and the doctor bit his lips sharply as he shot a glance at the police official. Inspector

Herndon, however, showed no signs of believing the hysterical old man.

But Hugo Miller leaned forward quickly. "That isn't your gun;" he denied.

"It is. It is. It's mine. I've had it for years—I I couldn't help but know it!" The old man was literally shaking with the passion of his assurance.

Miller turned abruptly to the inspector. "There's your master link!" He shot the sentence out roughly. "MacDonald took that gun from the house and—"

"He didn't, I tell you, he didn't!" The old sailor's voice shrieked the denial. "I took it, and I killed Avery with it. I killed him—Ray didn't—I did." He began to sob the words over and over.

"And you set fire to the house?" Miller's voice cut in sharply.

"Yes; I burned it down. I did it myself."

The inspector took it up reluctantly. He had been unable to object to Miller's questioning, for the man would have written the story in any event. And the inspector knew that the Skipper was lying; knew it absolutely. Across the inspector's mind suddenly flashed the picture of his own five-year-old son, and he understood the motive that led to the confession of the elder MacDonald.

"Why did you do it—and how did you do it?"

The doctor saw the trend of the inspector's ques-

tion and forced the old man into a chair, while he remained standing protectively near.

"Tell them, Captain," he urged huskily. "Tell them the whole thing."

For a time the man sat hunched in the chair into which the doctor had forced him, and, in the silence, Miller nodded suggestively to the inspector. The old man was not, in the reporter's opinion, an efficient liar. Which would only make the story he would tell more interesting.

"When that lawyer chap bought that land from Clara," the old man began slowly and carefully, "Clara signed some sort of a paper. I don't rightly know what it was."

"A deed?" Miller suggested, and the interruption brought a scowl from the doctor.

"That's it! A deed!" The Skipper seized eagerly upon the words. "And when we found out about Avery's big deal, and when Raymond got so—so excited about it, I knew that if I could get this paper—this deed—back again it would be all right."

A pitying smile came to the reporter's face for the old man's ignorance.

"So—so I went to Avery's house," continued the speaker with great deliberation. "I went there after Irma came out to our place and after I knew there wasn't anybody at home but Avery, and I sneaked into the library."

"How?" Again Miller cut in.

"Through—through—I opened a window," the man explained, and across the minds of all three men there flashed the same picture; a mental photograph of Avery's house as it had stood in the center of the large, green square, with its small French windows built twelve feet above the level of the ground and equipped with carefully concealed burglar-alarms.

"I got into his—his library where I thought he would keep his—his deed and such. I saw a big safe, but it was locked and I couldn't open it."

The Skipper stopped speaking for a moment to make certain of his ground.

"I'd—I'd taken a gun with me like—like all burglars do." He had somewhat vague notions concerning the armament of burglars. "And when I found the safe was locked I—I though maybe Avery had the key for it and I—I hunted till I found his room and went in there."

The doctor was slowly shaking his head as he gazed down at the huddled figure in the chair. The inspector was unconsciously drumming on the desk before him and Miller smiled in open skepticism.

"But Avery was awake," continued the old man, "and when I got into the room he—he—jumped at me and—and that's when I shot him. I had the pistol in my hand when I went—went into his room. Then I got scared and—I set the house

a fire, thinkin' I'd burn up Avery and—and this deed I'd come to get."

He stopped. "And—and that's how I did it;" he finished lamely.

"Then why did you rush into the house later and try to save Avery if you knew you had killed him?"

The question was plainly unexpected, and the Skipper's eyes were wide with surprise as he turned them to the inspector.

"Oh, that! Yes, I—I—oh, naturally I thought if I brought him out—you see, I knew where he was—that no one would ever suspect *me*. But it was a hard job. There was a beam from the deck above layin' square on him, and I had to move that. Then—" The little man seemed to want to elaborate on the story, but a question from the feature writer interrupted.

"And you set fire to the house in Avery's room, or where?"

"You see I didn't set fire to his room—no, not there. I—I—I ran back into the library, and that's where I started it. You see, that was to make sure that I would burn up the place the deed was."

"What sort of vault—er, what kind of safe did Avery have that made you sure it opened with a key?"

The old man seemed ready for the question, but his answer showed how little he knew of any devel-

opments in the construction of safes and vaults since the days of his own youth.

"You see, it was standin' against one bulkhead—against a wall, I mean, about— about amidships I should say of the room. It was about as big as me; a big, black, shiny safe, and there was a keyhole in the door covered by a little nickel gadget about as big as—as a dollar."

The inspector shook his head and the manner in which he looked at the little old man in the chair would have been ludicrous under other circumstances.

"You 'didn't see any other place in the room where the—er—deed might have been kept?"

"No. I was sure it was in the safe. You see, I know that everybody keeps deeds and such in safes."

"You didn't happen to see another one, did you? A larger safe, maybe, or one hidden away somewhere. Covered up."

"Oh, no." The Skipper shook his head. "No, I saw this big one standing, like I told, amidships of the room. It was a great big safe. Bigger than any I'd ever seen before."

"Where did you ever see a safe before?" The seemingly ridiculous question was put by Miller, and the old man seemed startled.

"Why—why, I don't—" then his eyes lighted with a recollection and he turned eagerly to the inspector. "Remember one that was in the little store

we used to go to, Herndon? Right next to the schoolhouse? It was—was just like that, Avery's was, only—only a whole lot bigger."

The inspector's breath caught on the recollection. He saw again the picture of himself, a tiny worshipping youngster that trailed on the heels of the rangy, older lad to and from the schoolhouse that had long since been demolished.

The doctor stood stupidly silent, and the inspector suddenly shook his head as though to clear away his thoughts.

But Hugo Miller had no thoughts other than the case in hand. He turned from the Skipper to the inspector, and his hands spread in a wide final gesture:

"Avery's vault was built into the library wall," he said rapidly. "It was covered by portières and was the latest thing in the Defy double-combination wall-safes."

CHAPTER XXIII

AT GOLGOTHA

THE girl came slowly down the steps and into the room in which the doctor sat. The huge man sat limply in a chair by the table, a cigarette burning between his fingers, and his gaze fixed intently on the thin spiral of smoke that curled upward toward the cheap electric-light fixture suspended from the center of the ceiling.

The utterly blank expression on the heavy features of Doctor Edward Lester gave absolutely no clue to the man's thoughts, and the little eyes, that followed so intently the smoke spiral as it curled upward, were really vacantly staring—seeing nothing. He could not have said whether he had sat one minute or one hour in the chair by the table. The passing of time had ceased entirely, and no outward sound impinged on his consciousness.

When, finally, the Skipper had gone entirely to pieces in the office of the inspector, and had collapsed altogether under the strain, he had been carried by the doctor and the inspector to the ambulance from the Harris Hospital that still awaited the doctor's return.

During the ride to Springfield the big man had held the almost frail form of the Skipper, and the old seaman did not regain full consciousness until he had been carried into his own home by the doctor, under the wide startled eyes of Irma Watkins.

It had been no easy matter to calm the old man when he regained a knowledge of his whereabouts. It had been a physical struggle to hold the Skipper in the bed into which the doctor had placed him, and, finally, the doctor had resorted to a mild hypodermic injection of morphine sulphate to quiet the struggling man. The narcotic had its effect, and the Skipper's struggles to arise had weakened slowly until, at last, he dropped back upon his pillows. Subconsciously the doctor realized that it was almost time for the old man to awaken, but the thought was a detached one: a something that seemed in no way vitally to concern the man in whose mind it was born.

It had been possible, thus far, to keep the news of her husband's arrest from Clara MacDonald, who slept quietly in her own room. How much longer she could be kept in ignorance depended entirely on the Skipper's actions when he awakened.

The doctor was afraid. It was not possible to remove the old man from the house for any length of time without exciting the sudden suspicion of the sick woman, yet the physician was virtually certain that the shock of sudden knowledge—the

news of Raymond MacDonald's arrest for the murder of Lucian Avery, no matter how carefully broken—could only have one effect on the woman in her precarious state. The battle after the death of Lucian Avery had not been an easy one, however much the doctor had made light of it, and he knew that it was only his own unremitting efforts, his own close and expertly keen attention that had prevented a more serious illness of MacDonald's wife. And that a repetition of even one-half the excitement that the news of Avery's death had caused would beyond question exhaust the already overtaxed vitality of Clara MacDonald.

In the man's mind there remained no longer the slightest shadow of doubt, and in his heart he felt the heavy certainty of the guilt of Irma Watkins.

He was fighting the battle with himself—and the victory was not yet.

The cigarette burned the fingers which held it and dropped to the floor. Even the physical pain of the burn was smothered in the greater mental one. It was given to the doctor to sacrifice once and for all the only woman that had ever come seriously into his life, or to chance—he *would* not be convinced that the result was inevitable—the gravest injury to the wife of his friend, to the father of his friend and to his friend himself.

And there had been added, to his torment, the additional factor of the suspicions of the *Times*—

Union and the city editor. Doctor Lester had not seen Ranson after the scene in his own office at the Harris Hospital, and he knew that Ranson had then known nothing of the developments that caused the arrest of Raymond MacDonald, and the subsequent scene in the office of the inspector.

But it was certain that Hugo Miller, who had been a witness of the last happenings, had gone straight to Ranson with the story, and, by now, the reporter was in full possession of all the facts, even to the damning one that established the weapon with which the crime had been committed as having come from the home of Raymond MacDonald.

It was true that suspicion immediately attached to the young man. Nothing was more natural to assume than the fact that he had taken the revolver with him when he had left the house. But the fact was too obvious. And the less obvious but exactly as possible one, could not but come to the reporter's mind, filled as it already was with the suspicion against Irma Watkins.

The girl had access to the house of MacDonald as freely as one of the family. What was more likely than the fact that she had taken the revolver with her from the house on one of her visits? Perhaps she had even done so, fearing exactly what had come to pass. The doctor's face burned shamefully as he realized that, even now, his mind was searching almost of its own volition for

some incontestable proof of the girl's innocence: some alibi.

The girl on the steps had remained silent, watching the man in the chair with clouded eyes. When the cigarette had fallen to the floor she had started forward impulsively, but stopped when she saw that the doctor seemed unaware of it. Now she came forward and quietly took the chair opposite the doctor's across the small table.

For a time the man's eyes rested absently on the girl. She had been so long an absolute and integral part of his every thought that her physical presence made no impression on him.

And it was only when the girl began to speak that the doctor stirred from his trance-like position.

"They have arrested Raymond, haven't they, Edward?"

The doctor raised his head slowly and his eyes met the steady eyes of the girl.

"Yes," he answered heavily, in no way surprised that the girl sat, in person, before him. "They've arrested him."

"Will you tell me about it, Edward?" Still the girl's voice was hardly more than a whisper, and again the huge man stirred in his chair.

"Yes, I'll tell you." One hand went mechanically into his coat pocket and searched for a cigarette. When he brought it out, however, he did not light it, but held it idly between his fingers.

"The inspector's case against him is very strong—very strong." The heavy voice was expressionless. "Very strong indeed."

The girl bit her lip sharply. No one knew better than she just how strong the case was. She had, long ago, anticipated this moment, yet now she scarcely realized that Raymond MacDonald had, indeed, been charged with the crime of murder.

"And has Lerner been released?"

An affirmative nod of the doctor's head was his answer, and the man continued:

"Against Raymond they have the fact that he had threatened Avery; that he had motive; that he was in a red fury on the night of the—the crime; that he had the ability to start the fire by electrical means within his knowledge, and——"

"And?" The girl's lips were parted eagerly.

"And they have a revolver which they can prove came from his house!"

Sudden lines appeared between the girl's eyes at the mention of the revolver. "You mean that it was Raymond's and—and was found—was found at—?"

For answer the doctor indicated a revolver in a case on the small table near the far wall. The table stood directly beneath an open window, and, only a moment before, he had opened the case and had seen the empty place where the second gun had lain.

The girl turned to the table indicated ; then a sudden color spread to her face.

"And they say that Raymond took that revolver?"

"There is nothing else to say, is there?" The doctor's eyes met the girl's squarely.

"Then they are wrong!" The girl came suddenly to her feet. "I say they are wrong;" she repeated, "for, after Raymond MacDonald had been gone an hour, and when I came into this house those two revolvers were lying in that same case!" Her finger pointed dramatically to the open case on the table. "I know, because I stood right here—" she crossed the room hurriedly, "—stood listening here for several minutes, and I could not help but see them both plainly!"

The doctor's lips parted. What was the girl trying to do? He had suspected—he had more than suspected that she would, in some manner, betray herself to him at the mention of the revolver that would, beyond question, convict Raymond MacDonald as the case now stood. But he had not expected this.

"You were listening?" He put the meaningless question merely to cover the sudden chaos of his thoughts.

"Yes." The girl's reply was instantaneous. "After the Skipper left I came down here; I thought I heard Clara call, and I stopped to listen.

The window was open then, and I went over to close it. Then I went back up-stairs to make sure that I had not heard Clara, and, when I found that Clara was asleep, I went into the next room where I remained."

"Why—why do you tell *me* this, Irma?" The doctor's heavy face was lined and sad. "Don't you see what you are doing, girl?"

"What *I* am doing? What do you mean? Of course I must tell it. I must tell it to the inspector." She half turned as though immediately to translate her words into action.

"But don't you see, girl, that I know—that I have known from the very beginning?"

The doctor's eyes held strange things as the girl looked quickly at the huge man. For a minute she did not seem to understand, and the doctor waited, his gaze dropping to his large veined hands.

The girl stood quietly, half turned to the doorway. Her eyes drifted from the picture of the huge man in the chair to the revolver case on the small table as though endeavoring to connect the two, in some fashion. Then she came very close to the man: "I don't understand, Edward," she said. "Don't you think you have said too much not to explain entirely?"

The doctor twisted the unlighted cigarette between his fingers. "And if no one was in the house

but you, Irma, can't you see who it was that took the revolver from its case?"

The girl drew back a pace, gazing with suddenly frightened eyes at the man.

"And you think—you think that *I* know—" She drew away slowly, her eyes fixed on the doctor.

"What is there to think? What else can I think?" The question came passionately from between the man's lips.

The girl sank into a chair. "You think," she repeated in awe, "you think that I know who—" Then the full realization of what the man did think burst upon her. "Oh! I know—I know what you think!" She suddenly sobbed brokenly, and the big man's eyes held a look of exquisite pain as he turned away.

When he turned again to the girl, the pain in his eyes seemed to have softened to an expression more subtle; a certain something that seemed to come from within him. "When will you marry me; Irma?" He put the sudden question huskily. "Will you marry me now—at once?"

The girl looked up with wet eyes large and incredulous. "Marry you? Marry you when you believe I——"

"Yes." There was no hesitancy now in the man's voice. He seemed to have found himself, to have triumphed over the doubts and wonders and fears that had possessed him. The way was clear.

"Marry me now! What do *I* care what you have done? What do I care for your reasons for doing it? I do not even ask. I know they were sufficient. Marry me now, and we will go together and see that this boy is sent back to his father."

The girl's eyes dried as by sudden magic, and a wondrous light of tenderness shone in them as she gazed at the huge form of the doctor. Now she knew the answer to the questions that had been puzzling her. Now she was sure of the man before her; sure as she had never been before; as she had never dared to hope to be.

Neither saw the pale frightened face of the Skipper that stared down on them across the balustrade above stairs, and neither saw the wild light that burned in his eyes as he listened.

"And you would do that?" The girl whispered softly. "You would be willing to do *that*?" It seemed utterly unbelievable; this man whose whole life had been lived by the code, whose every action had been one of honesty and uprightness and tenderness. "You want to marry me and then—then have me confess?"

"Yes. And immediately."

"But if I have nothing to confess. If I say that you are very much misled—what then?"

"But you will not say it. You will not. You know that you will not. Not with the knowledge of Clara lying up there awaiting the return of Ray-

mond. You can't. You are too—too good—too honest to permit this horrible situation to continue."

The girl closed her eyes. "Tell me everything you think, Edward. Just tell me everything you have thought from the beginning."

The doctor nodded obediently. Now he felt that he could speak without fear. "You are a woman, Irma—and you are very beautiful." The simplicity of the words sent a sudden hot pain into the girl's throat. "No one can be long near you without realizing your—your beauty and your—your exquisite vitality; without being always acutely conscious of the fact that you are a woman." The doctor was finding it more difficult than he had anticipated, and his eyes avoided the girl.

"I knew that the time would come when Lucian Avery, too, would suddenly become aware of the fact that you—that you are very—very desirable. You were often alone with him, and I knew that a sudden flame of passion would—" The color that spread over the girl's cheeks did not deter him. Instead, he averted his eyes again.

"And when I learned of the mur—when I learned that Avery had been shot, and found that you had been the last person with him, then I knew. I knew that he had done what men will do. And when I thought of you—startled, helpless, physically helpless before him, I was as nearly mad as it is possible for a sane person to be."

The girl opened her eyes and her steady glance sought and found the man's. What she saw in his eyes made her lean forward in an access of sympathy. The doctor's great misery was written in his face. There was no questioning the man's suffering.

Irma Watkins did not break the silence that followed. She was seeing, for the first time, the real man behind the doctor's unprepossessing exterior. And she marveled. From the very first the man had felt this thing; from the very first doubt his torture had been that terrible, gnawing thing of a Prometheus chained to his rock. Yet he had kept silent. And now the very honesty of him was compelling him to this additional punishment.

"I said nothing. What was there to say? When you killed Lucian Avery your provocation was the greatest there is on earth. Then came Lerner's arrest, and I awaited eagerly the result of the hearing. I was certain that Lerner was innocent, however guilty he may have seemed."

"How were you certain—dear?" The girl's cheeks reddened again as she added the final word, but the big man did not appear to have heard.

"I was certain," he answered slowly, "certain, because Lucian Avery did not die without speaking."

"What?" The girl's hand went to her breast in a sudden gesture, and the dead pale face of the old man who listened above grew set.

"I said," the big man repeated, "that Lucian Avery spoke before he died."

The girl watched his every movement as the crumpled cigarette fell to the floor, when the doctor reached into a pocket to bring out his small notebook. He tore one leaf silently and passed it to her.

She stared at the sentence scrawled there in the doctor's hand: "—Watkins—Miss Watkins—she tell—she—" For a long while she could make nothing of the words. Then came the sudden flood of light. The face she turned to the doctor was radiant:

"What he was trying to say," she half cried, "was that I *telephoned!*"

"You telephoned?" The doctor repeated the words blankly. "But Lerner has admitted that it was he who——"

"It was the first time," the girl explained hurriedly. "The very first time it happened. Raymond had called me up to say he wanted to see Mr. Avery. I told him that Mr. Avery wasn't in, and then he said he was going to see Coleman—Coleman Ranson at the *Times-Union*. A few minutes later when Mr. Avery came in I tried to call Ray at the *Times-Union* office. I asked for Coleman Ranson, but he wasn't there, and my asking is what Mr. Avery overheard when he——" Her explanation trailed off and stopped unended. At best it was but a minor point, and she realized it.

To the big man in the chair it meant only an effort to confuse the issue. He had thought too much of the words of Lucian Avery for the very simple explanation to convince him instantly. And when it became evident that the girl had finished the doctor went on:

"Then Lerner was released, and the inspector sent for me. I found that Raymond had been arrested, and, as I was about to come here, the Skipper flung himself into it by trying to confess to something he plainly knew nothing about."

The man at the head of the stairs drew back softly, as though fearful of being seen, and a suspicious moisture clouded the blue eyes to which he raised a weather-beaten hand.

"The revolver is the one strong point; the only point of consequence, and you say that it was here in the room when you arrived. Do you just *say* that, Irma? Are you trying to help Raymond only? *When* did you take the gun?"

And, as the girl did not reply, he mechanically sought another cigarette. This time, however, he lighted it with unsteady fingers.

"This is all, Irma. And you can see that when some one begins to think carefully about it—as Ranson and his editors already have"—he did not notice the girl's start of surprise at the information. She had thought that the doctor was entirely alone in his suspicions, and that they had been forced

upon him more by the broken information that Lucian Avery had tried to convey, than by any other circumstances—"then it will not be long," the doctor finished, "before the crime is traced to—to you."

The girl had sat quietly through the end of the story. And again her eyes were wet as she turned them to the doctor: "And you would be willing to marry me, Edward, even though you believe that I killed Lucian Avery because he—he—" She could not bring herself to say it, and again the poppy color stained her throat and face.

The doctor rose from his chair. "I am ready now," he said simply. "Will you come?"

The girl, too, rose and faced the big man. "I'll—I will go with you," she whispered, "I will go with you to Inspector Herndon's office, but—but I I will not marry you, Edward,—not now."

She had come very close to the big man and there was not the slightest tremor in her voice, nor did her clouded eyes falter for a moment before the man's steady gaze.

"Will you marry me—afterward?" The doctor's question was almost inaudible. "Will you?"

The girl's reply was not to the question itself. She raised her face and her answer came through the tears that hung perilously on her lashes: came in a whisper that was very soft:

"Kiss me."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ANSWER

THE inspector's little office was crowded. Directly across from the official sat Irma Watkins, and, standing behind her chair with the air of a protector, was Doctor Edward Lester. To the right Coleman Ranson sat on the far edge of a typewriter table, while in an opposite corner of the room, drooping wearily and hopelessly in a chair, sat Raymond MacDonald.

The scene that had just ended was one that none of those present would soon forget. The girl had told her story—told it straightforwardly, admitting nothing and denying nothing. And, because her listeners were men, each filled in for himself such portions of the story as needed amplification.

One thing was certain. In the face of the evidence that the girl would give regarding the matter of the revolver—the master-link as Hugo Miller had called it—the case against Raymond MacDonald would fall flat.

The duty that confronted the inspector was a hard one. All that he could do was to arrest the

girl, charging her with the murder of Lucian Avery.

Ranson, the reporter, had listened keenly to the recital. It differed in no manner from the case he had already made out against the girl; the case which, so the city editor agreed, was the strongest yet made against any of the suspects.

The girl had frankly admitted that the revolver was in the house after both Raymond MacDonald and the Skipper had left it. True, she denied taking it herself, and remarked on the open window under which the table stood. But the supposition that the murderer had chanced to reach through that open window, pick up one of the revolvers and then had carried it across the city for the purpose of murdering Lucian Avery, was one that would certainly topple of its own weight.

The girl had simply made a statement. There had been no questioning, and she had said merely that she had not left the house of MacDonald at any time on the evening of the fire.

Unless she was prepared to admit the whole story, each man realized that her silence was the most advantageous thing for her in the circumstances.

She had not spoken of her relations with Avery—her daily business relations, and each man drew his own conclusions.

These facts stood out: The revolver was in the

house after the departure of the men; the girl was alone in the house. No one had seen her for the space of nearly three hours that elapsed between the time of the Skipper's leaving and the time that he was brought back by the ambulance from the hospital. From these facts it was evident that the girl *could* have committed the crime.

The very apparent *lack* of motive was significantly indicative of the real motive.

She was the last person who had seen Lucian Avery alive. This fact, too, was unquestioned. And this, coupled with the explanation she made of the words that Avery had gasped with his last breath in the hearing of Doctor Lester, lent color to the suspicions of the assembled men. Her explanation of Avery's broken sentence was too patently a grasping at straws, and Coleman Ranson, keen reporter that he was, knew that no sooner were Avery's words made public than the hydra-headed monster of scandal would soon find innumerable other and less innocent interpretations. For, while it was true that Avery had said he knew who was responsible for the telephone warnings, the name of the secretary had not been mentioned.

From outside the building came the subdued hum of the activities of the city, continuing evenly and steadily. The fast sinking sun shot golden rays through the windows of the office and reflected a subdued radiance into the dusty corners, touching

lightly the tense faces of the characters of the drama that was being enacted there.

Raymond MacDonald had sat silent throughout the entire scene, hopeless, cast down. He was certain that the proper explanation had not yet been given, and he did not for a moment believe that the girl had taken the revolver from the house. When the inspector had shown him the weapon he had instantly recognized it, despite its battered condition, and, not knowing the testimony he was soon to hear from the girl, he had realized how damning the evidence was against him.

For one brief moment the keen mind of Ranson considered the only heretofore unconsidered possibility. Could it be that Clara MacDonald had in some unaccountable manner secured possession of the revolver, found her way to her old home and had there committed the crime?

But the wildness of this theory was instantly apparent. Doctor Lester had stated positively that it was humanly impossible for the woman to have moved from the house. Even the matter of descending the one staircase to the room in which the revolver was kept always left her physically exhausted and gasping for breath.

That she had covered the several miles separating her home from the house of Lucian Avery, had committed the crime and had again made her way back across the city, and all this, unobserved, was,

as the doctor had declared, an utter physical impossibility.

The girl herself had sat with bowed head awaiting whatever course presented itself. She had done her plain duty in telling what she knew of the revolver, and she had justified herself, as much as possible, in the eyes of the man who stood so silently behind her.

If it was impossible to prove her presence in the MacDonald home for the whole time that she stated she had been there, and if, in the minds of the men before her, she was capable of having committed the crime with which Raymond MacDonald was charged, there was nothing for her to do but remain silent.

She would stick to the truth in the matter of the revolver. The pistol was in its case—she was certain—after Raymond MacDonald had left the house, for the younger man was already in the city when she had arrived there. This matter of time was susceptible of proof, and she realized that her testimony would clear the young engineer of suspicion.

She knew that her very inability to give any information to the men before her caused them to think in the only fashion in which they were capable, and she recognized the justice of their unspoken thoughts.

Even the doctor—and he first—had concluded

that she was guilty. The girl no longer questioned her feeling toward the big physician, and no longer doubted the utter sincerity of the man's love of her. And she knew that he would suffer immeasurably more than she, if Inspector Herndon acted in the only manner that it seemed possible for him to act, and placed her under arrest.

The silence in the office became almost unbearable. The inspector sat at his desk absorbed in contemplation of the twisted revolver before him. If he persisted in holding MacDonald, after the girl's evidence, it would only bring him the criticism of the press and the entire city. On the other hand—if he accused the girl flatly of the crime, and she denied it—there was still no way out of the dilemma. The inspector had learned his psychology in the hard school of the police force. And he knew men and he knew juries.

Granting even that the case against Irma Watkins were brought to trial; the sympathy of the entire city would be with the girl, nor could it ever be entirely proved that she had been justly accused. Regardless of evidence; regardless of the best efforts of the state's attorneys, the girl would be inevitably acquitted if she stuck straight to the story as she had related it; that the revolver was in the house when she arrived and that she had never for an instant quitted the house herself. In this event the mystery of how the revolver had come to be

found in the ruined house, and the mystery of the murder of Lucian Avery would always remain a mystery.

On the other hand it was not impossible that the girl would break under the gruelling fire of cross-questions and confess what the inspector now believed: that she had taken the revolver from the house some time before the day of the crime, and that she had shot and killed Lucian Avery in defending herself against an assault by the man.

The inspector almost wished that Hugo Miller had left well enough alone and not gone prowling about the ruins of the Avery home, and that the two revolvers had remained safely buried beneath the debris that had covered them.

So far as the city knew, no arrest had been made in the case after Harry Lerner's release from custody, and the city would not know until the following morning when the *Times-Union* would print the news—unless it was stopped—of Raymond MacDonald's arrest.

Inspector Herndon raised his eyes to find himself gazing into Raymond MacDonald's, and that young man's pale face indicated that he desired to speak.

"Well, say it." The inspector's voice shattered the silence and all eyes turned involuntarily to the young man.

"All that I want to say to you now," MacDonald's

voice was steady and he gazed straight before him, "is that during the whole day, in the course of which you say I killed Lucian Avery, I was on duty in the Power Plant in Springfield, and there are a dozen men—Mr. Haily among them—who knew it. Not for one moment of that whole day, except the time it took me to go from home to the office of the *Times-Union* that night was I entirely alone, and in that short time it was not humanly possible for me to have gone to Ortega."

The silence descended again upon the problem that faced the inspector, and, when it seemed that something must snap, and even the huge doctor began to move impatiently, a scuffle in the hall, attended by cries in the unmistakable voice of the Skipper, broke the stillness.

A uniformed officer entered escorting the old man. "Excuse me, sir," apologized the officer, "but the Skipper here just would come in."

The inspector only nodded, and the Skipper crossed immediately to his son.

There was an indefinable something about the little man that was different: he was the same Skipper, yet not the same. Perhaps the impression was due to the half-healed scars of the burns across his face from which the protecting bandages had been stripped.

"They'll never hold you, sonny. I know they won't." He was speaking softly to Raymond Mac-

Donald. "You see, sonny, I'm goin' to tell them the real truth this time."

It was the manner in which he spoke that gripped the attention of all the room. A new dignity seemed to sit on the man's slender shoulders: a dignity that sat strangely well upon him. His expression "the *real* truth" caused each person present to sense that now was about to be disclosed to them the one link that was needed in the mesh of evidence to make the chain true and straight. But on whom would the shackles be forged by the Skipper's words?

The Skipper faced the room. There was a helpless defiance in his manner, yet there was that nuance of verity in his voice when he spoke again that would not be gainsaid.

"I know," he said slowly, "I know that now you are trying to place the blame on Irma, there."

The doctor drew slightly nearer to the girl as though to show that, no matter what come, he remained unchanged in his loyalty.

Even the inspector knew that he was face to face with something tremendous; some tremendous and telling truth. But what truth? What had the Skipper to tell that he had not already told? He leaned over tensely across the desk fingering a blotter, tearing bits of it off and dropping them to the floor.

The Skipper seemed unconscious of the sudden

tenseness in the room. He kept his eyes fixed on the inspector's as though trying to convince him that there was no concealment—no evading.

"I killed Lucian Avery."

Raymond MacDonald came to his feet and put a protecting arm about the old man. "Dad, you mustn't—— You——"

"Let me handle this, sonny. They didn't believe me before, but now they've got to believe me."

The inspector fidgeted. He couldn't understand—— "You told us that before."

"Yes, and it was true. But the rest of the story wasn't the truth."

"Why wasn't it?"

"Because," answered the Skipper quietly, "because I was tryin' to say I did other things than kill Lucian Avery. And I didn't. I killed him—but I didn't burn the house."

There was a sigh from somewhere in the room. The Skipper continued. "What I was scared to tell before," he explained simply, "was that I was afraid that Raymond had set the house on fire."

"Go ahead," nodded the inspector. "Tell us all of it."

And to the circle the old man told his second story, but this time it was unmarred by the glaring inconsistencies that had marked the first narration. And where, before, the whole structure of the Skipper's tale was bolstered by palpable lies and

impossibilities, this time there was no doubt. The facts as he told them dovetailed too perfectly into what was already known of the circumstances.

"And then," he said after a brief pause, "then Irma came to the house. I had been walkin' the deck like a lunatic before she got there; I was scared she would be too late."

"Too late for what?" queried the inspector.

"To save Raymond. I didn't want the boy to meet Avery. I knew he'd gone to see him and I was afraid that he would kill Avery—kill him—if they crossed each other."

The Skipper paused and glanced at his hearers. He was fighting a hard battle, fighting to make them believe the truth of his statements, and he saw that he was winning. He saw that they were believing him against their own wills; that he was upsetting their established ideas and building up their conclusions anew.

"And so," he went on quietly, convincingly, "when Irma got to the house I made her promise to stay till I got back. Then I went out. But when I got outside I stopped to think a minute. I didn't know what sort of trouble I might be sailin' into, so I went back into the house and got a gun. I got that gun there"—he pointed to the inspector's desk—"that same gun. It was in the case where I always kept it, and there wasn't anybody in the

room when I got it. Irma had gone up-stairs. The gun was there when she got to the house—she saw it, I know—and she didn't know I took it."

The Skipper was explaining this feature with particular care. And it had its effect. The girl was staring at him with eyes large in wonder, and the doctor had been gripped with an exultant astonishment as he listened. If the Skipper was to be believed—and there now seemed no doubt that he was telling the truth—then Irma also had told the truth and the gun was not taken——

"And then I went on out again." The Skipper continued unhurriedly. "And when I got to Ortega the house was on fire. Remember I wasn't myself—I was—was under a strain, and when I saw that burnin' house I felt sure that Ray had been there. God knows he had all the cause in the world to want to injure Avery any way he could."

Raymond MacDonald was sitting with his face buried in both hands, and the older man shook his head pityingly.

"And when I heard that Avery was in th' house, and—and before I knew it I was in there, too. You see, I wasn't sure but what Ray was in there with Avery, and I—well, I just couldn't think straight.

"I don't know how I stumbled into Avery's room, but I did, and I saw him on the floor held down by a beam from the deck above. Anyway, believe me or not"—he threw his arms wide and

turned pleadingly to his auditors— “what I’m sayin’ now is true—true, every bit of it.”

His listeners were leaning forward. With the dying out of the Skipper’s voice there was a hush of tense expectancy. Somebody whispered “Go on!” There was no hint of disbelief in any face.

“And then—and then I shot Avery. Not in cold blood, Herndon”—he turned to the Inspector, “—my blood wasn’t cold then; it was hot—boilin’ hot. Because”—and his voice became low and positive and insistent—“when I saw Avery there, unconscious but alive I knew—yes, I *knew* that Ray had been there and then set fire to the place.”

A choked sob came from the younger man in the chair, but the Skipper continued:

“I didn’t think—I couldn’t think none. I had the gun in my hand, and I’d come there expectin’ to find something awful. I didn’t stop to think a minute but just shot. I shot and just then another part of the house caved in”— he turned to the inspector—“I guess that’s why you didn’t hear it, Herndon. Anyway, I knew that Raymond had left him there and set fire to the house. Right or wrong that’s what I thought that minute with the smoke chokin’ me, and I knew that—that arson was an awful thing. Even if that wasn’t bad enough I knew that Avery might die in the house and then Ray would ‘a’ been charged with murder, too.

So—so I dragged the beam offen Avery and I came out with him.

“And so I shot him, and brought him out. No matter what happened then I knew Raymond was goin’ to be all right, for there ain’t no doubt that Avery was alive when I shot him—not none.

“And that’s the whole truth. I didn’t tell it at first because I was scared that you would try to do something to him—to sonny there—for burnin’ Avery’s house. And I realized since that you didn’t believe me because I wasn’t tellin’ the truth.

“But I’ve told you all of it now—every bit, and I ain’t held back a thing. The man who helped me come down here just now told me that this lawyer chap had been released and that the papers had all proved that the house caught fire by accident. And—and—I guess that’s all.”

The Skipper stopped again. There was no doubt that his simple confession was true. Belief was reflected in every tense pitying face. He turned again to the inspector.

“You believe me now, don’t you, Herndon?”

Herndon choked. “I—I have to, Skipper.”

“And—and you’ll have to arrest me, won’t you?”

Irma suddenly buried her face in her hands. The doctor patted her shoulder with a clumsy gentleness, and Ranson turned suddenly away from the sight of the Skipper’s appealing eyes.

The inspector came heavily to his feet. "Yes, I'll have to arrest you, Skipper; the law says that. The law says it"—his face purpled with the violence of his feelings—"but, by God! the law don't say you'll be convicted. This ain't any matter of technical law, it's a matter of—of heart: and, Skipper, there ain't twelve men in this state of Florida that would ——" He turned his face for a moment from the little old man before him: then an hysterical gruffness choked in the inspector's words: "Say, Skipper, when you get back home you'll start carvin' the schooner you promised that youngster of mine, won't you?"

THE END

